**Kathy Rushton and Joanne Rossbridge make the case for nurturing first languages when teaching English...**

In contemporary Australia teachers are attempting to recognise and build on the wide range of linguistic and cultural resources that their students bring to school. Teachers, parents, school systems and the wider community recognise that educational success is dependent on the development of literacy in English, but this is not necessarily achieved with pedagogical approaches which only focus on the acquisition of English. Many researchers over very many decades have shown that the nurturing and development of the first language or dialect can form a strong basis for learning across the curriculum as well as learning the dominant language and discourse of the school (Dutton & Rushton, 2018).

Some students come to the classroom from economically disadvantaged homes and some from communities where Standard Australian English (SAE) is an additional language or dialect. While many Aboriginal languages are no longer widely spoken many others are being revived by their communities and being taught in schools. It is therefore of increasing importance that teachers both understand and acknowledge the language and literacy practices of students. Understanding students' communities and home backgrounds includes understanding the languages and registers that students speak outside the school context, as the impact of home and community practices on learning is of vital importance. This impact has been investigated over a number of decades by linguists, educators and sociologists like Basil Bernstein (as cited in Ewing, Callow & Rushton, 2016). He demonstrated how the language choices made by children from differing socio-economic classes affected their educational attainment (Ewing, Callow & Rushton, 2016). The impact of socio-economic background is of vital importance to Indigenous, immigrant and refugee students as many of these students are marginalised in both education and the broader society.

## Teacher Knowledge

While many schools and teachers may find it challenging to develop authentic relationships with communities these challenges can be met by developing a 'creative pedagogy'; one which demonstrates explicit inclusion of students' linguistic and cultural repertoires in the educational setting. By adopting this inclusive approach which supports pride in identity, genuine connections can be made and at the same time wellbeing is promoted. Critical to this process is teacher knowledge to assist students in responding to and composing texts using their first and additional dialect or language. Understanding of a *functional model of language and genre theory* (Rossbridge & Rushton, 2014) will ensure that teachers are able to support students to make appropriate language choices in all curriculum contexts. Discussions about these choices should revolve around how the subject matter (*field*) is represented in texts and how the composer has developed the relationship to the audience (*tenor*). When reading or composing texts, understanding choices relating to the features and structure of a text (*mode*) will both challenge and support students to use all their linguistic resources to move along the *mode continuum*. The concept of the *mode continuum* is useful as the sequencing of activities can be designed in order to gradually develop oral language while moving towards a more written-like mode.

Similarly, the literacy engagement framework outlined by Cummins et al. (2015) lists components for effective literacy instruction which can affirm student identity and impact on academic achievement:

> This literacy engagement framework posits print access/literacy engagement as a direct determinant of literacy achievement and also specifies four components of instruction that enable students to engage actively with literacy. Engagement with literacy, broadly conceived, will be enhanced when (a) students' ability to understand and use academic language is scaffolded through specific instructional strategies such as use of graphic organizers and development of efficient learning strategies; (b) instruction connects to students' lives by activating their background knowledge, interests, and aspirations; (c) instruction enables students to carry out challenging academic work that affirms their identities; and (d) instruction explicitly develops students' awareness of and control over academic language across the curriculum.
>
> (Cummins et al., 2015, p. 559)

Implementing these pedagogical principles is vital for economically disadvantaged communities which have been silenced by the dominant culture and suffer from what Paulo Freire (1975) calls 'the culture of silence'. A genuine invitation to share personal stories and language in the context of the school is one way to break the silence and develop a genuine relationship with students' families and communities. For teachers, this process can provide a basis for knowing how students learn as well as giving parents and caregivers an opportunity to engage with their child's learning as cultural and linguistic experts. An Aboriginal Elder named this process 'two-way learning' and in the proposed model of two-way learning, the community is able to take responsibility for their children's education: "We're gonna make sure our kids read and write in terms of who we are as Indigenous people . . .'. Giving voice to the community, recognising links to Country and allowing students to define 'their mob' are important issues in defining Aboriginal identity and by inference the identity of any community" (Rushton, 2015).

Pedagogical approaches that will support all students to engage with subject English have been successfully used to support the development of language and literacy, especially in writing (Cummins, et al., 2015). These approaches are defined by their ability to support student engagement, affirm identity and provide opportunities for genuine interaction with communities. For instance, students can be invited to use their first language in the classroom to create texts about their own lives and to reflect on their own use of the languages or dialects in their personal repertoire:

> The creation of identity texts assumes particular importance in the case of students from social groups whose languages, cultures and religions have been devalued, often for generations, in the wider society.
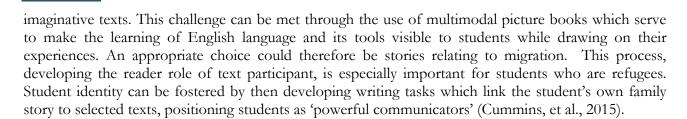>
> (Cummins et al., 2015, p. 558)

## Using quality children's literature in the classroom

If an inclusive pedagogy is implemented the resulting rich discussions and reflections related to pedagogical choices can guide ongoing decisions for teachers about how best to support literacy development. The challenge is to find ways to give students with limited English access to rich

imaginative texts. This challenge can be met through the use of multimodal picture books which serve to make the learning of English language and its tools visible to students while drawing on their experiences. An appropriate choice could therefore be stories relating to migration. This process, developing the reader role of text participant, is especially important for students who are refugees. Student identity can be fostered by then developing writing tasks which link the student's own family story to selected texts, positioning students as 'powerful communicators' (Cummins, et al., 2015).

By carefully scaffolding their learning, teachers can give students access to the meanings of rich literary texts and the literate language valued within schooling. If this scaffolding is organised at the point of planning and reflection, the strategies chosen will support students to move along the mode continuum in one or more languages (Rossbridge & Rushton, 2015; Dutton, et al., 2018). When students are supported through field building, modelling/deconstruction, and joint and independent construction, the close relationship between reading and writing becomes evident. Students are able to draw upon the language and features of modelled texts if texts have been deconstructed to explicitly show a range of structural and literary features.

The texts selected should therefore provide the opportunity for students to share their own stories. A focus on personal family stories, including migrant and refugee stories, should align with student backgrounds and interests and make their previous experiences, language and culture visible to each other. Acknowledging and activating students' background knowledge simultaneously affirms the legitimacy of students' experience, and, the legitimacy of students' backgrounds. (Cummins et al., 2015, p. 559)

By building on family stories and experiences, especially as migrants/refugees, the field for talking and writing, can be developed with rich picture books on the topic to model English language choices (Dutton et al., 2018). If texts are selected for the quality of their language and illustrations as well as their connection to students' own stories the context is set for acknowledging students' language and culture and for encouraging the use of their first language. Knowledge and sensitivity are needed to create a safe and supportive environment in classrooms and across schools as some students' stories may include traumatic experiences which may impact on their current life in Australia (Hertzberg, 2012).

Picture books on family stories, refugees and migrants:

> *Ziba Came on a Boat* (Lofthouse & Ingpen, 2007)
> *Waves* (Rawlins & Jackson, 2018)
> *Teacup* (Young & Ottley, 2015)
> *The Arrival* (Tan, 2006)
> *The Little Refugee* (Do, 2012)
> *The Treasure Box* (Wild & Blackwood, 2017)
> *Shake a Leg* (Pryor & Omerod, 2010)
> *Stepping Stones: A Refugee Family's Journey* (Ruurs, 2017)
> *Suri's Wall* (Estela, 2015)
> *Refugees* (Miller, 2005)
> *Remembering Lionsville* (Bancroft, 2013)
> *Out* (George & Swan, 2016)

*My Two Blankets* (Kobald & Blackwood, 2014)
*The Journey* (Sanna, 2016)
*Home and Away* (Marsden & Ottley, 2016)
*Flight* (Wheatley & Greder, 2015)
*Feathers* (Cummings & Lesnie, 2017)

## Developing a creative, interactive literacy pedagogy

Teachers can draw on available knowledge of students' experiences and circumstances and given a positive school culture where students feel safe and supported, they are very willing to share their own stories. Developing a 'creative pedagogy' provides teachers with a chance to explore, to engage and to inspire their students. Teachers can start to build bridges to communities by opening up their own classrooms to their students' languages and stories. Employing English as an Additional Language/Dialect (EAL/D) pedagogy where the role of oral language is critical in supporting students to develop academic literacy and, it is essential for teachers to consider patterns of interaction and substantive communication (Dutton et al., 2018) and features of dialogic talk when designing and reflecting upon classroom practices.

To develop a truly dialogic classroom teachers and students will aim to work together in a reciprocal learning relationship in which students feel supported to express their ideas. Teachers can facilitate dialogic teaching by planning and building cumulative, coherent lines of inquiry. For instance, when deconstructing rich texts, literary elements such as plot can be linked to the text structure, the stages and particular phases of the text. Character development and the relation between settings, events and plot structure can be examined by looking at phases across the text and identifying particular patterns that dominate the narrative. For instance:

- description – where the action is slowed to describe the physical setting or characters
- reaction – characters' feelings in reaction to an event or situation
- reflection – characters' thoughts reflecting on the situation and/or evaluating its significance
- event – other events that continue the events of the story (Dutton et al., 2018).

By exploring texts at all levels including group and clause level, students are able to develop tools for considering grammatical choices. By using quality literature and explicitly teaching about language, all students will not only develop academic literacy but also be able to confirm identity. From the outset, shared reading with a range of picture books can activate background knowledge and confirm the value of sharing personal experiences. Thoughtful planning can encourage students to make connections between their own family stories and those of characters, and to use the language of the texts they are reading to recount and describe their own very important *Australian stories*.

## References:

Cummins, J., Hu, S., Markus, P. & Montero, M.K. (2015). Identity texts and academic achievement: Connecting the dots in multilingual school contexts. *TESOL Quarterly Volume* 49, Number 3, 2015,555-581.

Dutton, J., D'warte, J., Rossbridge, J. & Rushton, K. (2018). *Tell me your story: Confirming identity and engaging writers in the middle years.* Newtown: PETAA.

Dutton, J., & Rushton, K. (2018). 5-14 Confirming identity using drama pedagogy: English teachers' creative response to high-stakes literacy testing. *English in Australia* Volume 53 Number 1, 2018 https://www.aate.org.au/documents/item/1606

Ewing, R., Callow, J. & Rushton, K. (2016). *Language and literacy development in early childhood.* Sydney: Cambridge University Press.

Freire, P. (1975). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* New York: Continuum.

Hertzberg, M. (2012). *Teaching English language learners in mainstream classes.* Newtown: PETAA.

Martin, J. (1985). 'Language, register and genre', in F Christie, (editor) *Children writing course reader*, Geelong: Deakin University .

Rossbridge, J. & Rushton, K. (2014). *The critical conversation about text: Joint construction.* PETAA Paper 196. Newtown: PETAA.

Rossbridge, J. & Rushton, K. (2015). *Put it in writing.* Newtown: PETAA

Rushton, K.R. (2015). *Learning to be literate in Aboriginal communities: The significance of text* (doctoral thesis). Available from The Sydney eScholarship Repository at http://hdl.handle.net/2123/12779.

*Kathy Rushton has worked as a literacy consultant, ESL and classroom teacher with the DoE (NSW), and in a range of other educational institutions. She is interested in the development of literacy, especially in socio-economically disadvantaged communities with students learning English as an additional language or dialect. Kathy is currently a lecturer in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney.*

*Joanne Rossbridge is an independent literacy consultant working in both primary and secondary schools and with teachers across Sydney. She has worked as a classroom and ESL teacher and literacy consultant with the DoE (NSW). Much of her experience has involved working with students from non-English speaking backgrounds. Joanne is particularly interested in student and teacher talk and how talk about language can assist the development of language and literacy skills.*