Lost for words: why the best literacy approaches are not reaching the classroom

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It seems barely a week goes by without some commentary on falling literacy standards. Discussion about raising literacy standards is always to be welcomed. We do quite well in Australia, but we can always do better, and public debate is important. However, once again the media and politicians have drifted into the old and irrelevant phonics vs whole language debate.

Recently, WA Labor MP Alannah MacTiernan kicked off the most recent iteration of the debate with an article provocatively titled ‘Post-modern claptrap rules in schools’ and laid the blame for perceived dropping literacy standards at the feet of academics and bureaucrats, and proposed the rollout of a specific phonics programme in all Australian schools. She has a strong ally in her political opponent, Federal Education Minister, Christopher Pyne, who has repeatedly invoked a return to phonics teaching as the panacea to all challenges in education. Indeed Minister Pyne conflates ‘phonics’ with ‘effective teaching’ so that the former is his sole definition of ‘quality teaching’ and ‘a robust curriculum’. As he said in a recent interview on Sky TV.

‘We want the curriculum to be robust, to be rigorous. We have to increase the training of our teachers at university level, the undergraduate and post-graduate study, to move the curriculum away from the child-centred learning and towards more orthodox and phonics based methods of teaching.’

No teacher, academic or education bureaucrat believes phonics is unimportant, and phonics is clearly articulated in the Australian Curriculum as a necessary component of teaching literacy, as ACARA CEO Rob Randall reminded Ms MacTiernan in a press release. The problem with politicians taking us back to an old debate, that has long since been done and dusted, is that it means that important discussions about a growing educational achievement gap in Australia are hijacked.
I have no doubt that Ms MacTiernan and Mr Pyne, like every academic, bureaucrat, employer, parent and teacher in the country, only want the best for Australian children. Ms MacTiernan has seen success in one school she is involved with and attributes that to a phonics programme and wonders why that programme isn’t in every school. Mr Pyne has seen first-hand a young family member benefit from a synthetic phonics programme, and thus assumes that all children would benefit. But educational reforms must be based on more than backyard bbq stories, and one solution to one of the ‘pointy’ ends of literacy challenges faced by some students is unlikely to be useful, or even necessary, for the general population.

But the most worrying aspect of this distracting ‘phonics’ debate is that it fails to address what are indeed real concerns about some of Australia’s international literacy results, and that is the widening gap between those who do well and those who do not. The last PISA results showed a disturbing tail of underachievement amongst the disadvantaged in Australia and the upcoming release of the latest round of PISA results will tell us whether we have improved – although our own NAPLAN results suggests we might not have much to be optimistic about.

We can be fairly certain that the 15 year old students who are underperforming on PISA or NAPLAN know their sounds. Phonic knowledge, or lack of it, is not the problem. They are performing poorly because they cannot comprehend what they are reading. They have poor vocabularies and cannot follow sentences that employ more complex language structures. They cannot read between the lines, they don’t pick up nuance and inference.

Our low achieving students (both in PISA and the home grown NAPLAN literacy tests) share one, very telling, common characteristic. They don’t speak ‘school English’, or Standard Australian English, at home. They may speak a language other than English, or Aboriginal English, or a creole, or ‘bogan’ English (‘I seen youse yesterday’). But it’s not school English; it isn’t how the teacher speaks and it certainly isn’t what PISA and NAPLAN reward. Neither do they have the vocabulary of their higher achieving peers. So, it is school’s job to teach school English, its structure and its vocabulary, to ensure everyone gets equal access to the learning that happens at school. And this is where we come closer to understanding why we have that growing achievement gap in Australian schools. The number of non-Standard Australian English speakers in schools has grown over the years, and Australia doesn’t cope well with ‘non-standard’.

Many teachers struggle with these learners through their own limited understanding of how the English language works. This is in no way an indictment of teachers’ own English language skills, nor of their capacity to teach students well. My observation of Australian teachers is that they are extraordinarily skilled at managing the learning process. What they do in the classrooms works wonderfully for most learners. However, they are less effective with the students who write ‘I seen that at the movies’, or ‘My sister go to shopping on a car’. All teachers can correct those errors but far fewer can explain them to the students.

Some in the community may be outraged that many of our teachers lack this explicit knowledge of language, and already there are murmurs that a literacy test for teachers in training will ensure that all teachers will know their past from their perfect, and their coordinating conjunctions from their modal verbs. But that outrage, and those tests, miss an important point - being able to name parts of speech does not automatically convert to improved reading comprehension, any more than knowing your sounds does. The answer lay in the conversion of that teacher knowledge to effective student learning.
Each year, by popular demand, I deliver a workshop to about a dozen schools. It’s called ‘10 things every teacher should know about the English language’. The first 9 include the usual suspects: verbs, phrases, clauses, sentences and I throw in a couple that are less well known: reference, ellipsis and theme. But it is the tenth that is the most important. Every teacher should know that the purpose of language is to communicate; that it changes according to whom you are talking, why you are talking and what you are talking about. Therefore all our teaching about language must be done in context and in the course of achieving real purposes.

These days most Australian teacher education faculties teach language knowledge. The teachers in my institution, and probably others as well, learn to teach language explicitly through beautifully written children’s literature, looking at how real authors tell their stories through their careful vocabulary choices and their exciting sentence structures. Unfortunately my graduates are sometimes instead required to implement a commercial phonics programme, where no books are read, no rich vocabulary is learned, no stories are written and lots of stencils are coloured in.

The ‘phonics versus whole’ debate is pointless, and it is distracting. Our failing students know their sounds, they can even read simple sentences. Their diet of bland and meaningless home ‘readers’ with their repetitive sentence structures and controlled vocabulary has ensured this. Such books teach our low achieving students from non standard English speaking backgrounds nothing about how ‘school English’ works and do not set them up for success in national and international literacy tests. What these learners need is good literature, and teachers who have a strong understanding of how the English language works which they can convert to meaningful teaching.

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