Learning literacy: learning with literacy

David Wray

University of Warwick, United Kingdom

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Abstract

The standard of literacy achieved by school students, in particular in reading, is an issue which attracts perennial media and professional attention. Although the focus of literacy teaching has tended to be on initial literacy skills, it is the contention of this paper that greater attention needs to be given to the uses to which these skills are put in terms of wider learning. The aims of the paper are, firstly, to explore the nature of what we might term 'extended literacy skills' and, secondly, to draw out some principles for the teaching of such skills. It does this through a presentation and analysis of two encounters with extended literacy each involving a different 10 year old student with difficulties in basic literacy. The article will try to show that these literacy difficulties were not a bar to the exercise of extended literacy – the students simply required thoughtful and effective teaching.

Introduction

The standard of literacy achieved by school students, in particular in reading, is an issue which attracts perennial media and professional attention. Recent media reports in the United Kingdom (e.g. Curtis, 2008) have suggested that, in England, around 20% of students emerge from their primary school experience without the basic levels of literacy attainment expected of them. This is in spite of a 10 year intensive focus on literacy teaching by the UK government, and what is termed "the stubborn 20%" are apparently resistant to the huge amount of effort and resource which has been poured into primary literacy teaching over this 10 year period. In the US, the 2011 Nation's Report Card, Reading (NCES, 2011) suggested that 24% of American 8th graders had not reached Basic level in reading performance. The equivalent data for Writing for 2011 showed that 20% of 8th graders had not reached Basic level (NCES, 2012).

Interestingly, however, the bulk of the attention given to literacy teaching in the past few years, in the UK and in other countries, has been on initial literacy skills (currently, in many countries, the focus is on the teaching of reading through systematic, synthetic, phonics programs). Yet the achievement scores which draw the attention in international comparisons such as the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) tend to be those of 11 year old (PIRLS) or 15 year old (PISA) students. It might be considered that, for these students, attention in literacy might not be best placed simply on initial skills but rather on the uses to which these skills are put in terms of wider learning and on the nature of the skills that learners need in order to cope with the diversifying curriculum of the later school years. Yet such "extended literacy skills" have always, it seems, received less attention than initial literacy skills in the literature as well as in classrooms.

In the UK, the major research and curriculum development in the area of extending literacy skills was carried out by the EXEL (Extending Literacy) project. The outcomes of this project (Wray & Lewis, 1997: Lewis & Wray, 1995) had a significant impact on the 1998 National Literacy Strategy in England, and upon subsequent teaching practice in UK schools. Its main thrusts were an emphasis upon strategies for developing comprehension in reading, especially of non-fiction texts, and the development of pedagogic practices in extending and developing writing, again especially non-fiction.

Times change, however, and the emphasis today in literacy teaching is very much on initial skills again. Yet this does not mean that the need to extend literacy skills has disappeared. On the contrary, it may be that an over-emphasis on initial skills is actually creating literacy problems. We know that, for many students, literacy problems are related more to engagement (or lack of it) than to potential to learn the requisite skills (Baker et al, 2000). One thing which is potentially extremely engaging for students (particularly boys) is using

literacy to engage with interesting facts and ideas. Extending literacy is essential, therefore, because it is a crucial way (and maybe for some the only way) of giving students an insight into what literacy is good for. It is also, of course, functionally essential, since the reading and writing that adults do every day tend to be to get something done. Reading our newspapers, our information manuals, our market reports and writing our letters of application, our complaints, our reports – all of these are vital to our working lives but require a lot more than knowledge of phonics. There is an imperative, therefore, for us to ensure that students are taught literacy beyond the basic skills.

My aims in this paper are, firstly, to explore the nature of what we might term "extended literacy skills" and, secondly, to draw out some principles for the teaching of such skills. I will do this through a presentation and analysis of two encounters with extended literacy. Each encounter involved a 10 year old student with difficulties in basic literacy. I will try to show that these literacy difficulties were not a bar to the exercise of extended literacy – the students simply required thoughtful and effective teaching. Both encounters involved the students in the use of both reading and writing, although the emphasis placed on each of these was slightly different in each encounter.

Encounter 1: Zoe and the dolphins

Zoe is a 10 year old with reading problems. Her learning support teacher works individually with her for three lessons a week. On this occasion, the teacher arrived in the classroom to find that Zoe, along with the rest of the class, had been asked to 'find out about dolphins'. The outcome of her "research" is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Zoe's initial writing about dolphins

She could not read this work back to her teacher and had only the vaguest understanding of what she had written. Of course, we all recognize what had happened. Zoe had copied verbatim from a book. Why? Research (Wray & Lewis, 1992) has suggested that most students are aware that they should not copy directly from books. Many can give sound educational reasons for this (e.g. "you learn more if you put it in your own words"), and yet they continue to do so. This may be because of the nature of the task the student has been given and the type of text they use when reading for information.

The purpose for "finding out" may not be clear to the student and how to begin may seem difficult and daunting. Having located a source on the required topic, the student might still

find the text difficult. Students in primary classrooms tend to lack experience of the different genres of non-fiction and their organizational structures (Winograd and Bridge, 1986; Littlefair, 1991). They find the linguistic features (vocabulary, connectives, register) more difficult to comprehend than those of narrative texts (Cervetti et al, 2009; Halliday and Hasan, 1976) and their textual inexperience affects their writing of non-fiction as well as their reading. In Zoe's case, the problem was compounded by her poor literacy skills. Diligent copying was her only strategy for coping with the demands of the task.

Zoe's support teacher introduced Zoe to another way of approaching her task. At the end of their hour together Zoe had produced a different piece of writing about dolphins (see Figure 2).

How thay live.
Dolphins live in familys and oftern there is about 7 in a family. There would Be about 3 femails in one family But only one femail.

1 Dolphin live for aBout 25 years But pillot wales Can live por50 years. Killer whales have Been known to live longer.

Sometimes Dolphins get whashed onto the Beach which means that there skin BoDys get hot and unless thay are helped Back into the water thay Shall Die even if thay are helped thay Make there way Back to help other Dolphins. Thay make there way Back to help Because thay hear the Distresing cry of other Dolphins. We Donot know why thay Do this.

Figure 2: Zoe's final writing about dolphins

The teacher's first step was to take Zoe through two crucial stages in information reading (Wray & Lewis, 1997) and teach her some strategies to use prior to looking in books.

Activating Prior Knowledge (What do I know?)

There is a great deal of research indicating the importance of prior knowledge in understanding new information (Bråten & Samuelstuen, 2004; Keene & Zimmerman, 2007). Furthermore, it is important that this prior knowledge be brought to the forefront of the learner's mind if it is to be useful (Bransford, 1983). Schema theory (McVee et al, 2005) suggests that knowledge is structured and categorized into schema, organized cognitive "maps" of the parts of the world we know about. When we encounter new knowledge we incorporate it into our existing schema either by accretion (adding detail to the map) or restructuring (altering the map to fit the new information). If we have already activated our prior knowledge (schema) we are more ready to deal with new knowledge.

Many teachers already use discussion to activate prior knowledge but research suggests that this can be an ineffective way of enhancing comprehension unless it is undertaken carefully (Alvermann et al, 1987; Murphy et al, 2009). If prior knowledge is to be made explicit, it may be helpful to record it in some way. This has the added advantage of leaving record of the student's knowledge and highlighting gaps or errors in that knowledge.

The KWL grid (Ogle, 1989) is a simple but effective strategy which both takes students through the steps of the research process and also records their learning. It gives students a logical structure for tackling research tasks in many areas of the curriculum and provides simple but logical support scaffolding. A KWL grid consists of three columns:

What do I KNOW about this already?	What do I WANT to know?	What did I LEARN?

Zoe's teacher introduced her to the strategy by drawing a KWL in Zoe's jotter. She then asked Zoe what she already knew about dolphins and acted as a scribe to record Zoe's responses. What Zoe knew can be seen in Figure 3.
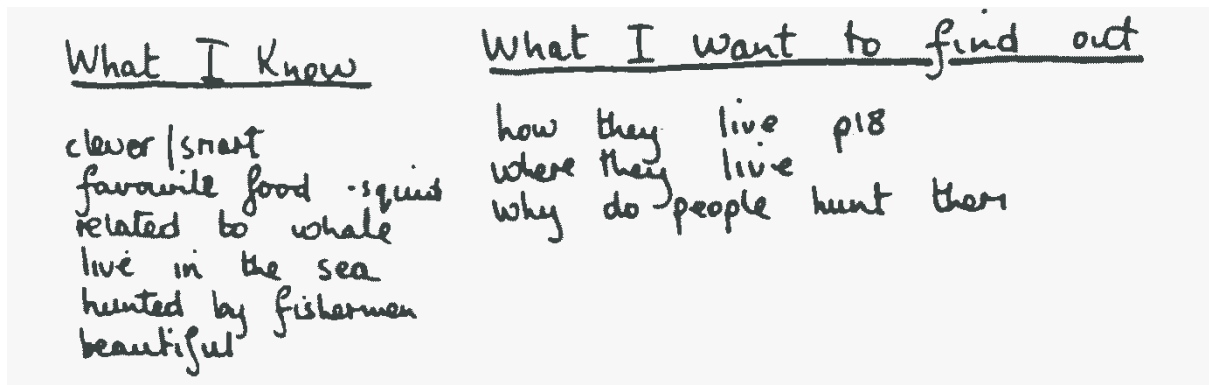
What I Knew

clever/smart
favourite food - squid
related to whale
live in the sea
hunted by fishermen
beautiful

What I want to find out

how they live p18
where they live
why do people hunt them

Figure 3: Zoe's KWL about dolphins

Not only did this activation of prior knowledge play a vital role in helping Zoe comprehend, but it also gave her an active engagement in the topic right from the beginning. By asking her what she knew, her self-esteem and sense of "ownership" of knowledge was enhanced.

Establishing purposes (What do I want to know?)

The next stage helped focus the subsequent research. The usual formulation of the task, as in "find out about", is far too broad to be useful and can be read as requiring enough information to fill a postcard or to fill a book. Discussing and recording what she already knew was enough to generate further questions for Zoe - questions which she herself was interested in researching. These were again scribed by the teacher (see Figure 3).

On this occasion Zoe and her teacher decided to focus on just one question (they had only one hour together) and she was encouraged to brainstorm around her "How do they live?" question. Again her teacher scribed and the resultant concept map can be seen in Figure 4.
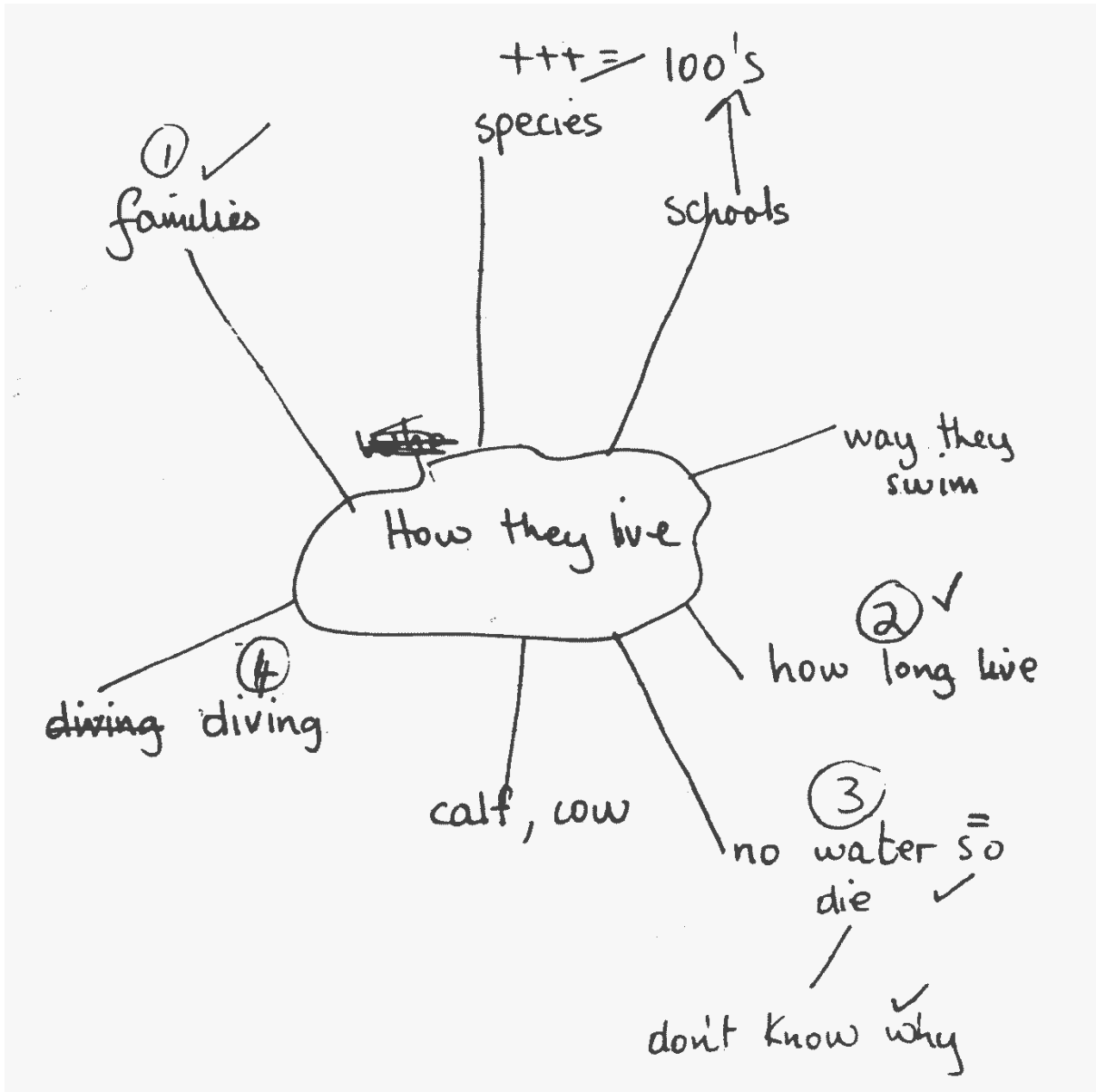
Figure 4: Zoe's concept map about dolphins

The sub-questions generated by this procedure were numbered to keep the process clear and manageable and at this point Zoe was ready to return to her books to try to find answers to her questions. We can see from the writing she had completed by the end of the session (Figure 2) that she was working her way logically through the questions (she had completed 1 and 2) and not only had she learnt something about dolphins but she had also had a powerful lesson on how to begin research.

Encounter 2: Scott and the Egyptians

As we have seen, some students appear to find writing non-fiction problematic compared to writing narrative. Students often lack experience of the different genres of non-fiction and their organizational structures. This textual inexperience affects their writing (Gallagher,

2000). One of the main strategies we developed to support the writing of such students is the scaffolding technique known as the writing frame (Lewis & Wray, 1995).

A writing frame consists of a skeleton outline of different key words or phrases, according to the particular generic form. The template of starters, connectives and sentence modifiers which constitute a writing frame gives students a structure within which they can concentrate on communicating what they want to say, rather than getting lost in the form. A writing frame scaffolds appropriate writing forms and style, and also helps overcome some other writing problems.

a) The blank page
Most writers will agree that the most difficult part of writing is the first line or two. Getting started can be so difficult, even for experienced writers, that they invent a number of "delaying tactics" (sharpening pencils, making coffee, etc.) to put off the awful moment. A blank page can be very daunting and for many less experienced writers it can result in abandoning the writing task.

b) Writing and talking
When talking to another person, the language user receives constant support for his/her language. In a dialogue one person says something, prompting the other person to say something, which in turn prompts the first person to reply, and so on. Talkers receive continual prompts for their language. Writers, on the other hand, get no such prompts. They are alone, forced to produce language without support from another.

c) The "and then" syndrome
Inexperienced writers tend to have a limited range of ways of joining together ideas in writing. Most teachers will recognize this by the prevalence of "and then" in their students' writing, as if this were the only way of linking ideas. Young writers need support to broaden their range of connectives.

Ten year old Scott was a writer just like those we have described. When asked to write, his response would usually be active avoidance. Writing was clearly a chore for him and it was rare that he would produce more than a line or two in response to any request to compose.

On this occasion, however, something different happened. Scott's class had watched a video about the Ancient Egyptians. This time, instead of asking Scott to write his responses to the video on a blank sheet of paper, the teacher gave him a writing frame to guide him. The frame she used was the following:

Before I began this topic I thought that

But when I read about it I found out that

I also learnt that

Furthermore I learnt that

Finally I learnt that

As well as simply presenting Scott with the writing frame, the teacher also, and this is important, began by talking him though the sequence of sentence starters and discussing together the kinds of things he might write in response to each. His final piece of writing can be seen in Figure 5. Without personal knowledge of Scott it is difficult to realize how significant this piece of writing was to him. He was asked to read it aloud to his classmates, who responded with spontaneous applause. Perhaps for the first time in his school career so far, Scott saw himself as a successful writer.
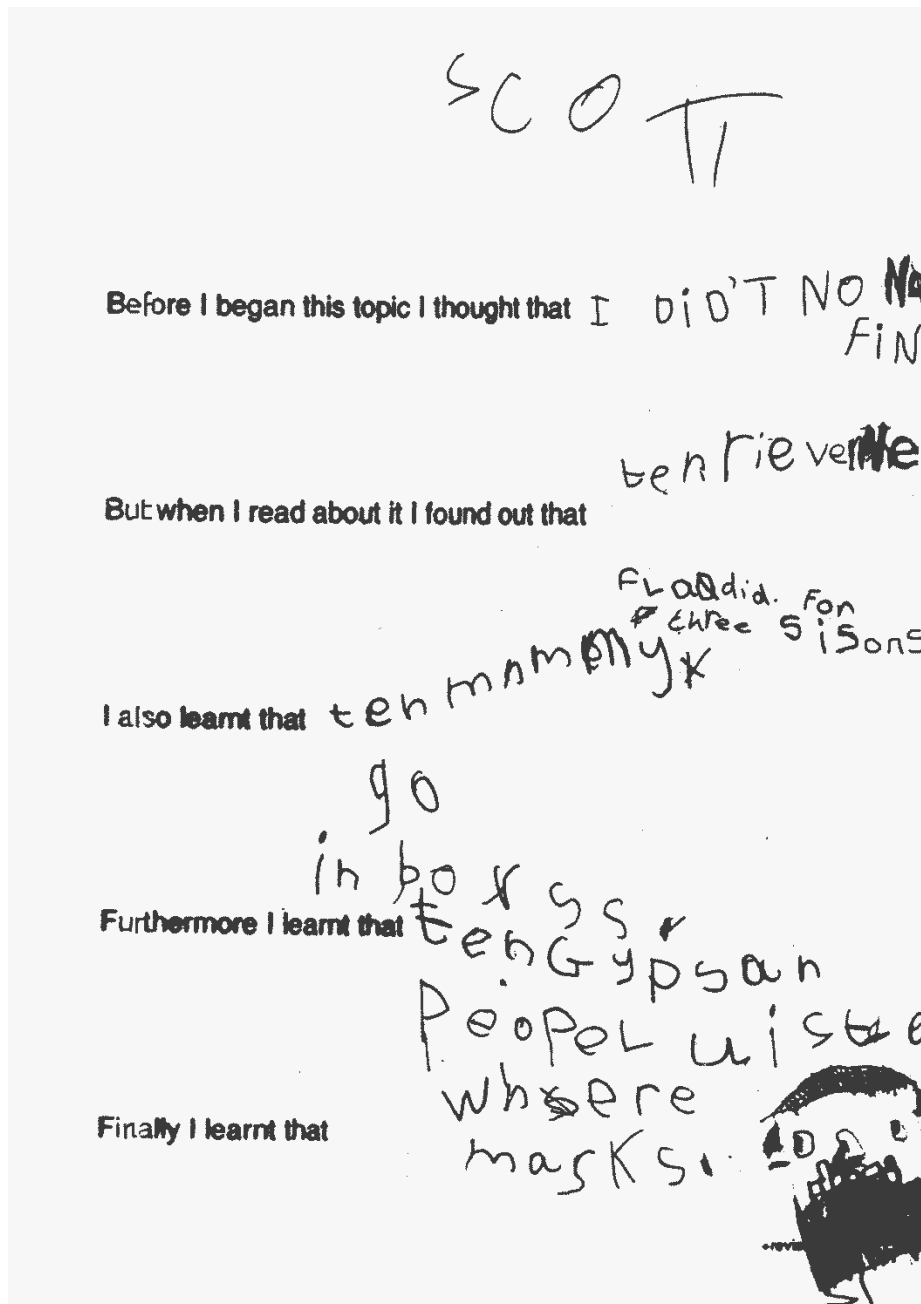
Figure 5: Scott's writing about the Egyptians

Writing frames such as that used to support Scott's writing have, since they were introduced to UK teachers (Lewis & Wray, 1995), been quite extensively evaluated in research studies, in subjects such as Science (e.g. Warwick et al, 2003), foreign language learning (e.g. Taylor et al, 2005), English literature (e.g. Fones, 2001), and Mathematics (e.g. Rawson, 1997). The conclusion from these studies has been that it is not the content of the frames nor the particular configuration of sentence starters used that provides the benefit to learners. The success of such scaffolding devices is, rather, attributable to the way in which these frames aid teachers in actively promoting learning as a social process in their classrooms.

Features of effective teaching

The two cameos just described have a number of elements in common, which, I would argue, are characteristic of effective teaching.

Engaging content

In both cameos, the material which formed the focus of the reading and writing was interesting in its own right. It concerned aspects of the world which the students would have wanted to explore even had they not been within a classroom context.

One of the main findings to emerge from research into reading achievement has been that engaged readers tend to be achieving readers (Wigfield et al, 2008; Baker et al, 2000). This link is not surprising at all – most adults can think of activities that engage them, and at which they make much more effort. And the opposite is also true. Students who are not engaged are reluctant to take part in these activities; because they avoid taking part they do not get the levels of practice which might help them improve; because they do not improve, they carry on struggling. The only way to break into this vicious circle is to try to ensure that students do find reading activities engaging. Ensuring this is a strong characteristic of effective teachers. As Baker et al (2000) put it: "students in the classrooms of outstanding teachers experience classroom environments that facilitate intense literacy engagement" (p. 12).

Teacher modelling

Another feature of the cameos is the role of the teacher within them. Zoe and Scott each experienced a teacher who not only told them what to do but also joined in and did it with them. By doing this, the teacher not only offered support, but she also provided them with a model of how to act like an expert in reading and writing.

What these teachers were doing was similar to Palincsar & Brown's (1984) "reciprocal teaching". This teaching procedure is based upon the twin ideas of "expert scaffolding" and what "proleptic" teaching: that is, teaching in anticipation of competence (Oczkus, 2006). The student is firstly a spectator as the majority of the cognitive work is done by the expert, then a novice as he/she starts to take over some of the work under the close supervision of the expert. As the student grows in experience and capability, the expert passes over greater and greater responsibility but still acts as a guide, assisting the student at problematic points. Eventually, the student assumes full responsibility for the task with the expert still present in the role of a supportive audience. The approach is often referred to as an apprenticeship approach, and there is a substantial research literature which suggests it

is a very effective means of developing skills (see Braunger et al (2004) for applications of the apprenticeship approach to extending literacy).

Scaffolding

An essential corollary to teacher modelling is the concept of scaffolding. The modelling of an activity or skill by an expert practitioner by itself does not guarantee that the learner takes over the activity independently. What is needed is an intervening period in which the learner can be offered support but in which this support is gradually reduced as independence is gained. Pearson (1985) referred to the teaching model implied here as the "gradual release of responsibility" model.

In the cameos described above, both the KWL grid and the writing frame used were forms of scaffolding. These devices acted to support the students in their literacy activities, making it possible that each student could achieve more than he/she would have done without the support. In our work on the Exel project (Wray & Lewis, 1997), we always made the point strongly that scaffolding devices such as writing frames were not intended to be static teaching supports. We argued that the use of a writing frame should always begin with discussion and teacher modelling before moving on to joint construction (teacher and learner(s) together) and then to the student undertaking writing supported by the frame. This oral, teacher modelling, joint construction pattern of teaching is vital for it not only models the generic form and teaches the words that signal connections and transitions but it also provides opportunities for developing students' oral language and thinking.

Expectation of success

The final common feature of both cameos is that the teacher made her interactions with each student in the confident expectation that a successful outcome would result. Beginning with *Pygmalion in the Classroom* (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968), an extensive body of research has described how teachers' expectations can influence their learners' performance. While it would be misleading to state that teacher expectations determine a student's success, the research clearly establishes that teacher expectations do play a significant role in determining how well and how much students learn.

Conclusion

I have tried in this article to do a number of things. My main aim has been to make, and exemplify, the case that students with literacy difficulties do not always just need more initial literacy teaching – they need this literacy extending, that is, they need guided opportunities to use and apply their literacy to achieve something which both they and their teachers consider worthwhile.

I have also tried, through the classroom episodes I have presented, to elaborate a little on the nature of extended literacy skills, and, along the way, to present some classroom strategies for teaching such skills. Finally, I have tried to identify some common features in the effective teaching of these skills.

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