6-1-2010

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Kate Mullin
Association of Independent Schools

Rhonda Oliver
Edith Cowan University

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Kate Mullin
Association of Independent Schools

Rhonda Oliver
Edith Cowan University, rhonda.oliver@ecu.edu.au

Mullin, Kate and Oliver, Rhonda. A Second Language/Dialect Acquisition Perspective on the Accelerated Literacy Teaching Sequence [online]. Australian Journal of Language and Literacy, The, Vol. 33, No. 2, June 2010: 151-163. ="http://search.informit.com.au/documentSummary;dn=123500315113370;res=IELHSS">Here

A second language/dialect acquisition perspective on the Accelerated Literacy teaching sequence

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Kate Mullin
Association of Independent Schools

Rhonda Oliver
Edith Cowan University

AUSTRALIAN JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE AND LITERACY, Vol. 33, No. 2, 2010, pp. 151–163

Introduction

The National Accelerated Literacy Program (NALP) operates, in the main, in an English as a second language (ESL) or English as a second dialect (ESD) medium across Australia, primarily targeting Indigenous students with low levels of English language literacy. With its distinctive pedagogy, it is backed by a sequence of teaching strategies and routines. Programs using this pedagogy have been implemented with different age groups and across a spectrum of rural, remote and urban schools in the Northern Territory (Gray, 2007; Gray & Cowey, 2001), Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia (Gray, Cowey & Axford, 2003), the ACT (Adoniou & Macken-Horarik, 2007) and Victoria and New South Wales, where it is promoted as the 'Learning to Read, Reading to Learn' program (Rose, 2005; Rose & Acevedo, 2006).

The Accelerated Literacy (AL) program makes no explicit reference to second language acquisition (SLA) theories. Yet it is primarily used to teach students who either come from homes where a traditional Aboriginal language is spoken, thus the students are learning English as a second language (ESL), or live in homes where the variety of English is not standard Australian English (SAE), the dialect associated with educational and other major Australian institutions, so that this group is learning (standard) English as a second dialect (ESD).

So how might the AL program work to accelerate the literacy levels of mainly Indigenous ESL and ESD students, seemingly without recourse to language learning, and in particular, SLA theories and the methodologies they underpin? In this paper we aim to address this question and provide an alternative perspective and theoretical interpretation of the practices associated with AL. We begin by presenting an overview of the stages of the AL teaching sequence and then map SLA theories onto the different phases of

the teaching sequence. The purpose of this mapping is to propose possible links between AL practice and theoretical explanations put forth by SLA theorists that would undergird them. We argue that, collectively, the teaching and learning strategies associated with the various stages of the AL teaching sequence are essentially grounded by a range of language learning theories.

Background: The teaching sequences of the AL model

In the Northern Territory, during the two year trial period 2001–2003, five hundred students were identified as 'at risk' because their reading age was two or more years below their chronological age (Gray, 2007). The need for acceleration to age appropriate reading levels was apparent, but unlikely to ensue if previous patterns of gains persisted. Before entry into the AL program, the rate of gain for these students was calculated to be in the order of 0.42 years of reading gain for each year at school (Gray, 2007). However, over the period of their involvement in the project, these same students averaged 1.78 years of reading gain per school year. This gain was facilitated using a teaching sequence comprising several stages (summarised in Figure 1), which teachers use as a blueprint for lesson planning. Although the stages require distinctively different methodologies, they are neither discrete nor immutable. Each makes its own particular contribution to the understanding and building of academic literate discourse (Gee, 1999).

The *Low Order* and *High Order Literate Orientation* stages provide students with a particular disposition to the focal text (Cowey, 2005). Additionally, these stages use meaning to guide students towards the location and identification of particular lexical items or 'content words' (Rose, 2008, p. 67). Because these texts presume knowledge of SAE language and pragmatics, the Low and High Order Literate Orientation stages are critical to the AL approach because they serve to initiate Indigenous students into the literate *discourse* of the mainstream classroom. Directing students to focus and talk about the language of texts familiarises them with the specialised 'ways of using language, of thinking, and of acting' (Gee, 1991, p. 4), required to engage successfully with the written texts associated with educational institutions. Importantly, these activities generate opportunities for interaction, including the *negotiation for meaning* (Gass & Varonis, 1994; Long, 1996; Varonis & Gass, 1985).

During the *Transformations* stage of the teaching sequences, the emphasis shifts to the domain of critical reading as the 'student's orientation to the text' shifts 'from that of a reader looking for meaning to that of a writer learning how to use a writer's techniques' (Cowey, 2005, p. 12). As students deconstruct and reconstruct text passages, the overall aim is to understand the author's motivation for particular language choices and their effect on the reader. As in the High Order Literate Orientation phase, the Transformations component is intensely interactive, involving *collaborative dialogue* (Swain, 2000). This

Figure 1:
Overview of teacher tasks in the Accelerated Literacy teaching sequence

#1: Low Order Literate Orientation. The teacher…
a. Summarises text & begins to build shared corpus of knowledge;
b. Interprets illustrations, story & ideology; and
c. Poses questions students can answer, having been given information.

#2: The teacher reads text passage (while students follow/read along).

#3: High Order Literate Orientation. Using enlarged text, e.g., on OHP, the teacher…
a. Directs students to locate, recognise and articulate important words and phrases (*Preformulation*)
b. Analyses author's language choices, possible intended meanings & explains author's technique; and
c. Guides discussion using planned 'questioning/scaffolding sequence' (Gray, 2007, p. 38) to elicit and build on shared knowledge. (*Reconceptualisation*)

#4: **Transformations** (from readers to writers). The teacher…
a. Guides student groups as they (physically) deconstruct text using cardboard strips of selected passages;
b. Directs students' attention to grammatical features, punctuation and author's intended meanings; and
c. Organises word recognition tasks, leading to spelling (early childhood classes).

#5 (or #6) Spelling. The teacher...
a. Analyses structure of key words; and
b. Guides students to chunk word-letter patterns.

#6 (or #5) Writing. The teacher...
a. And students jointly reconstruct text passages;
b. Discusses writing techniques previously analysed & students practice;
c. Guide students in their independent writing tasks.

(Based on Cowey, 2005; Gray, 2007)

provides opportunities for significant linguistic output from students as they display their knowledge about language and literate discourse, acquired through the study of texts. Additionally, the teaching sequence, classroom interaction and literate texts all serve to build understandings about how SAE language is used to make meaning and to prepare students to apply this awareness when making choices in their own written work.

Brief overview of second language acquisition theories

Having begun in the 1960s, SLA is a relatively new field of academic study, which seeks to explain how a second or subsequent language is

learnt. While the focus of early SLA research centred on the acquisition of individual morphemes (the smallest unit of meaning) and on individual learner differences, it later expanded to examine the influence of external and internal factors. All these areas of SLA enquiry find parallels in first language acquisition research.

Similar to first language acquisition studies, SLA draws on a number of disciplines including psychology, linguistics and language education. This rich backdrop has facilitated the development of a number of theoretical perspectives of language learning, each of which forms a theoretical continuum. As in other social sciences, the nature-versus-nurture debate influences the arrangement of different theoretical positions with respect to the posited contributions of cognitive and/or environmental factors.

Investigating the cognitive aspects of language acquisition is particularly challenging. As Doughty and Long (2003) point out, 'language learning, like any other learning, is ultimately a matter of change in an individual's inner mental state' (p. 4). To gain insight into the process, various data collection methods have been developed, e.g., stimulated recall protocols. (For a discussion of this and other more recent data collection methodologies, see Mackey & Gass, 2005.) Nonetheless, the way in which transformations in the learner's mind are actually realised continues to be the focus of much SLA research and theory.

Two of the most influential theoretical positions that relate to both first and second language learning are those described as *nativist* and *interactionist*. While nativist theories posit that all humans are equipped with an innate language acquisition ability, interactionist models contend that the cognitive processes required for language learning are activated primarily as a result of social interaction. Together these theories have had a profound influence on our thinking about how language is learnt and they drive particular pedagogical practices. This is evident in second language classrooms, where methodologies clearly enact allegiance to particular theoretical positions.

Interactionist models

Interactionist frameworks foreground the important role of social interaction in providing opportunities for the learner to receive meaning input, produce comprehensible output and obtain feedback on their attempts. Such theories can be characterised as having a social or cognitive orientation, depending on whether the explanatory emphasis is placed on the social aspect of interaction or on the cognitive processes triggered by the interaction. Long (1996) describes the latter as '*negotiation for meaning*, and especially negotiation work that triggers *interactional* adjustments by the NS [native speaker], or more competent interlocutor, facilitates acquisition because it connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways' (pp. 451–452).

Nativist models

Chomsky (1965) was first to introduce the notion that humans have an innate disposition for language acquisition, which is biological in origin. He used the term *language acquisition device* (LAD) to refer to this internal mechanism. To account for the ability of young children to use language with a relatively high degree of grammatical accuracy, he also proposed the concept of a *universal grammar* to refer to the set of mental representations of principles which constrain all language use.

In the field of SLA, Krashen (1985) built on Chomsky's notion of an LAD, advocating along with colleagues (e.g., Asher, 1982; Krashen & Terrell, 1983) a *natural approach* to second language learning. Unlike Chomsky, however, Krashen did not leave everything to nature, arguing that input is 'the essential environmental ingredient' (Krashen, 1985, p. 2). In his *input hypothesis,* Krashen posited that language is acquired 'in only one way—by understanding messages, or by receiving "comprehensible input" ' (p. 2).

It should be noted that interactionists also accept the necessity of comprehensible input in the acquisition process. However, interactionists maintain that whilst comprehensible input is necessary, on its own it is insufficient. Those researching the Canadian Immersion program, for example, have found that learners also need opportunities to produce *comprehensible output* (Swain, 1995, 2005) and to receive interactional feedback, including metalinguistic comment (Lyster, 2004; Swain & Lapkin, 1995).

The pedagogical manifestation of the nativist theories is that input needs to be at the very core of the curriculum. In teaching practice, this means an emphasis on providing substantial comprehensible input. Another pedagogical implication is derived from Krashen's *i + 1 principle,* which posits that learners 'move from *i,* [their] current level, to + *1,* the next level along the natural order, by understanding input containing *i + 1*' (1985, p. 2). So the teacher provides 'roughly-tuned' (p. 9) comprehensible input to continually extend the learner's understanding of more complex language. However, to ensure that the input is embraced by the LAD, teachers must ensure that the learner's *affective filter* is low (Krashen, 1985), i.e., they must feel comfortable and confident about taking language risks. This means that when learners begin to produce the target language, errors should not corrected, particularly if they do not obstruct meaning (Krashen, 1985; Krashen & Terrell, 1983).

Mapping SLA theories onto the AL teaching sequence

Low Order Literate Orientation

Despite some significant flaws, Krashen's work has enhanced our understanding SLA processes, in particular the importance of focusing on meaning. The notion of roughly tuning comprehensible input is evident in the AL teaching sequence as when students are introduced to literate discourse during the

Low Order Literate Orientation stage (Cowey, 2005; Gray, 2007). Here teachers initiate students into the discourse of schooling (Gee, 2007) by directing them to observe and talk about aspects of the focal text such as its structural features, the characters' motivations, the author's ideology and meanings embedded in pictures. Borrowing Bruner's (1986) 'loan of consciousness' metaphor, Cowey (2005) explains that this 'loan' constitutes the teacher's 'understanding of the discourse implicit in the text', their 'literate interpretation of the meaning of the text,' 'their experience with reading' and their 'understanding of the educational ground rules for operating with such texts' (p. 9).

In AL, comprehension is seen as critical to both student engagement and to their participation. Thus, at the early Low Order Literate Orientation stage, teachers direct students to adopt a particular stance in relation to the text. So despite the explicit teaching, which runs counter to nativist practices, there is congruency because the onus at this stage is on teacher input, which provides the body of knowledge required for a literate understanding of the text. This later becomes a resource for constructing further complex understandings about how language is used to make particular meanings.

Thus from the start, the AL teaching sequence concurs with that which is advocated by some SLA theorists, namely that teachers guide classroom discussion with respect to the curriculum objectives (e.g. Donato, 2000). The AL approach aims to accomplish this in two ways: Firstly, teachers make decisions at the planning stage about input to be provided and to which particular aspects of the texts student attention will be directed. Secondly, they ensure that this input is comprehensible. Critical to this approach is the development of an orientation and corpus of knowledge that is shared by teacher and learners as they pursue a common (curriculum) goal.

To prepare for such learning, teachers need to plan the staging of their input. If comprehension is paramount, and is to be maintained, then careful consideration needs to be given, not only to what concepts need to be introduced to students, but what part language will play in this introduction. These kinds of pedagogical decisions appear to be underpinned by both interactionist and sociocultural perspectives. As will be shown, these frameworks appear to be influential, not only at this stage, but throughout the teaching sequence as well.

Having focused on roughly-tuned comprehensible input, teachers remain sensitive to students' level of comprehension, making adjustments as needed. In SLA terms, they negotiate meaning with learners, a basic tenet of interactionists. However, the methodology used seems to emerge more from sociocultural understandings because the negotiated interaction is not extensive. Comprehension repairs can be brief because the teaching sequence offers multiple opportunities to return to the text. This practice of scaffolding and recycling in learning, advocated in the work of Vygotsky (1978) and others, will be revisited below.

High Order Literate Orientation

The High Order Literate Orientation stage of the teaching sequence provides more finely-tuned input through a process of modification. Using a particular pre-planned questioning cycle, this phase refines the work of the previous stage, providing opportunities for increased student participation and access to further input to establish a common (literate) orientation to the text. From an SLA perspective, this phase has two distinct purposes: 1) to get students to *notice* language choices and their meanings; and 2) to facilitate student output using literate language. To achieve these objectives, teachers implement a variety of two-part 'interaction sequences', each comprising a 'preformulation' element, followed immediately by a 'reconcepualisation' segment (Gray, 2007, p. 38). (See Figure 1.) We now examine these two components in turn regarding their respective overarching (though not exclusive) functions and consider SLA theories with which they may be associated.

Preformulation and noticing

Gray (2007) describes *prefomulation* as an 'an attempt to align the intentionalities of both the teacher and students and to help the students see, "This is how, what or where I attend to in order to produce a response" ' (p. 38). In practice, the teacher uses a series of directional, *wh-* questions or paraphrase cues to guide students to locate and identify important lexical items and key phrases in the text. Students are thereby encouraged to look to the text for answers and become aware of the kinds of responses required in literate discussions of texts (Gray, 2007). From an SLA perspective, directing students to 'pay attention' to and articulate particular language items is referred to as *noticing* (Schmidt, 1990).

Schmidt claims that language learning cannot take place unless students consciously and specifically notice the form of the input and compare it to their output. Once this 'gap' has been observed, it serves as a *priming device* (Gass, 1997; Oliver, 2009), setting the stage for further learning. For AL practitioners and their students, conscious attention to input, coupled with opportunities for producing comprehensible output through meaningful interaction offers the greatest potential for acceleration.

Thus a significant part of the AL process involves encouraging learners to attend to the language of the text. Van Lier (1996) maintains that:

> To learn something new one first must notice it ... Paying attention is focusing one's consciousness, or pointing one's perceptual powers in the right direction, and making mental 'energy' available for processing. Processing involves linking something that is perceived in the outside world to structures ... that exist in the mind. (p. 11)

According to SLA interactionists, noticing is an essential element through which language learning can occur. Throughout the stages of the AL teaching sequence, students are directed to attend to elements which are significant

to the genre in general and to the focal text specifically. Moreover, during instructional conversations and other interactional opportunities, teachers direct students to pay attention to and adopt literate language in their output. The latter is perhaps most apparent in the reconceptualisation component.

Reconceptualisation and output

Gray (2007) proposes that the reconceptualisation part of the 'interaction sequence' (p. 40) serves two purposes: (1) to extend and affirm the learner's (literate) understanding of the author's intentions and meanings of the language used, and (2) to provide students with the experience of engaging in reflective literate discourse, albeit with skilfully orchestrated scaffolding. During this process, the teacher interacts with the students' linguistic output, using it to build and further develop the body of shared understandings.

The teacher's elaboration used to extend student understanding generally takes the form of additional contextual cues, paraphrasing, or repetitions, which in turn create opportunities for redundancy as well as for augmenting the corpus of common (literate) knowledge. The importance of providing elaborated input again has synergies with SLA research. Long (1996) contends that, rather than linguistic simplification, it is the adjustments made during interaction that result in linguistic elaboration that, in turn, lead to better understanding. Further, he posits that of the three possible types of input – unmodified, premodified (i.e., provided early during the Low Order Literate Orientation stage) and modification that occurs during interaction itself (often including elaboration) – it is the third kind of modified input that has the greatest potential for language acquisition.

The benefits of elaborated linguistic input is also recognised by SLA researchers in relation to developing reading comprehension (Pica, Young, & Doughty, 1987; Yano, Long, & Ross, 1994). Simplified or graded versions of texts tend cause learning to stagnate, so students do not progress along their personal learning continuum. However, when provided with scaffolding, their access to more complex texts is enhanced. Moreover, Pica, Young and Doughty (1987, after Mehan, 1979 and Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975) maintain that building student comprehension 'requires ... patterns of classroom interaction that are radically different from the pattern of teacher elicitation, student response, and teacher feedback that classroom research has identified as typical of teacher and student discourse' (p. 754). Indeed the teacher-student interactions occurring during the reconceptualisation phase diverge significantly from those of traditional classrooms.

As students are guided in reflective literate discussions about the text, teachers direct them to work from the wording in the text rather than relying on their memory or common sense understandings (Gray, 2007). Moreover, in this and in earlier stages, students are not asked to predict and generally do not have questions posed unless the teacher is sure they know the answer,

as often occurs in mainstream reading lessons. Having constructed a corpus of common knowledge and working closely with the now familiar text, the conditions for students to advance beyond their current level of performance are optimised.

The importance of this interactional support for Indigenous learners cannot be underestimated. Scaffolding their language production eliminates the need for explicit corrective feedback, a crucial element for learner engagement (Gray & Cowey, 2001). Gray and Cowey maintain that learning only happens when student stress levels are low and when affect is positive. In SLA terms, this translates into a low affective filter (Krashen, 1985). Thus the teacher's job is to provide sufficient support around learning routines so that students experience success and are motivated to participate in activities. This scaffolding, initiated through the provision of comprehensible input, allows for a series of interactions to be put in motion. In turn, these interactions allow for the elaboration of student output, which in the SLA sense, manifests as the negotiation of meaning. This modified interaction is paramount at this stage as enhanced comprehension allows students to take on greater challenges. Importantly, it enables students to apply this learning to their own writing.

Transformations and subsequent stages

The transformations stage of the AL teaching sequence seeks to further exploit meaningful interaction. This is now made possible as the teacher and students have by now a well established body of shared knowledge about the text. To reach this point, students have been exposed to input made comprehensible through interactional modifications. This process continues but with a greater degree of participation by the student, which can result in greater output opportunities and therefore increased student engagement. Holding knowledge in common can now provide opportunities for further negotiation within the learning experience. By definition (van Lier, 2000) this type of negotiation has three functions. Firstly, it improves the comprehensibility of the input, a major focus of the entire AL teaching sequence. Secondly, it enhances attention, an important aspect throughout the AL teaching sequence as well as a critical condition for language learning. Thirdly, it necessitates output.

It is at the Transformations stage of the AL teaching sequence that collaborative dialogue (Swain, 2000) is used to augment the second language acquisition process. Collaborative dialogue is dependent on student output. In recent years researchers like Swain and others have sought to distance themselves from a narrow definition of output, preferring instead to use the term *collaborative dialogue* (e.g. Swain, 2000, p. 97). However, the notion of output focuses on something being said or written, thus providing opportunities for the 'product' (that which was spoken or written) to be examined by the speaker/writer and others. According to Swain (2000), output forces students to process language more deeply and with more mental effort.

It also allows them to 'notice the gap' between input and their own output, potentially providing them with an opportunity to attend to what needs to be learnt to bridge that gap. One of the features of collaborative dialogue, which distinguishes it from negotiation of meaning, is that it does not have to result from misunderstanding between participants. The importance of the time spent creating comprehensible input, and thus common knowledge, can now be appreciated. It enables teacher and student or student and student to work together to create further understandings around the body of shared knowledge so that discussions around language can move into another, more complex, dimension.

Both the Transformations and Writing stages (dialogue before writing, pre free-writing) of the AL teaching sequence are designed to maximise the use of collaborative dialogue. The potential for co-constructing meaning can contribute to knowledge building, language learning and student participation. These stages of the teaching sequence are additional sites where learning and language learning can co-occur and where the focus moves beyond language per se to include motivations for construction, thus delving deeper into the world of academic literate discourse. Here learning is essentially constructed through socially mediated activities, language being used collectively as a thinking tool to share and communicate ideas. During the Transformations and Writing stages (pre free-writing stage) the opportunities for socially mediated language learning are provided through collaborative dialogue.

Socially constructed language learning and the AL teaching sequence

In the field of SLA, researchers like Swain (2000), Donato (2000), van Lier (2000) and others have advocated for the contribution that socially constructed learning can make to second language acquisition. The initial impetus for sociocultural theories of learning, and by virtue of this, language learning, originated in work of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978), whose research focused on the potential of 'the social' to construct learning. In this view, learning is a sociocultural process that develops in a context in which a more knowledgeable individual (e.g., a teacher) collaborates with a learner to negotiate new ways of understanding the world. Language serves as the means through which meanings are created and shared on the *interpsychological plane* (Vygotsky, 1981, cited by Wertsch, 1985). In other words, in the context of social interaction, language becomes a tool to mediate and enhance learning. For SLA theorists, this potential creates the situation where language is used to mediate language learning (Swain 2000). This process, however, does not end with the communication and sharing of ideas within the group. For this 'learning' to then belong to each of the group members, it needs to undergo a conversion process. This process happens on the *intrapsychological* plane, allowing learners to internalise that which has

been co-constructed. As Vygotsky asserts, 'social interaction actually produces new, elaborate, advanced psychological process that are unavailable to the organism working in isolation', (1989, cited by Donato, 2000, p 46). Bruner (1986) concurs, maintaining that teachers must

> cease thinking of the growth of the mind as a lonely voyage of each on his *(sic)* own, one in which culture (in its old pejorative sense of 'high culture') is valued not for its treasures but for its tool kit of procedures for achieving higher ground. (p. 142)

In terms of the AL teaching sequence, the influence of sociocultural theorists is evident throughout, but particularly during the later stages of the sequence. Armed with shared knowledge previously created, student participation is facilitated and enhanced, thus providing greater opportunities for co-constructing meaning.

Conclusion

At the outset, the aim for this paper was exploratory, to map SLA theory onto the AL teaching sequence. The theoretical position of nativists, cognitive and social interactionists and sociocultural theorists are clearly in evidence when mapped onto the AL teaching sequence. In fact, the AL teaching sequence seems to move along points of the theoretical continuum at the various stages. At the beginning the emphasis is on input, specifically in the creation of comprehensible input through a variety of modifications. Next there is an emphasis on interaction and on *noticing* through the negotiation of meaning. Later in the sequence, interaction that results in or from output is used to extend learning; and in the final stages there is more second language learning through collaborative dialogue.

So in conclusion, the alternative SLA perspectives and theories may have the capacity to explain, and account for, the contribution that AL pedagogy can make to improving the reading and writing outcomes for mainly Indigenous learners. In doing this it attributes a significant role to the AL teaching sequence as a tool that teachers can use to enact AL pedagogy.

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