

# Part II

## Literacy and Language

### Introduction

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The six chapters in this part all deal with literacy or language, at least incidentally. Three relate to teaching sight words in early primary school, one to promoting literacy in year 6, one to the teaching of other languages and one to the use of the students' first languages in schools.

While the first three relate to the teaching of sight words, this is actually incidental to the main concerns of the second and third of the chapters. Even so, these chapters assume the importance of the popular notion of sight words as referring to some selection of the most frequent words in written English, such as ones identified by Dolch or Fry (see Farrell et al. 2013). These words account for large percentages of written English text, so that a learner who can recognise Fry's 100 most frequent words by sight, for example, can read about half the words in most texts. While it is common to think of just such more frequent words as 'sight words', ultimately, of course, a mature reader should be able to recognise virtually all words as sight words, with no need to consciously work them out from their spelling (Ehri 2005).

Georgia McNicol's chapter (Chap. 5) describes how she was inspired by a workshop on visual learning to develop a system of 14 coloured hats to introduce 12 sight words each, and how this was met with great enthusiasm by both the children and their parents. Such a grouping of sight words under the names of colours is of course not uncommon, with the dozen or so highest frequency words often labelled 'goldern words'; see Sight Word Apps (2013) for an example of a more elaborate scheme. Georgia's contribution is how she was able to do this in a particularly successful way.

In Chap. 6 Ashley Lidbetter also deals with sight words, but her main concern is with how to provide integrated learning support for all students in a class, and thus without treating some students as different and tending to isolate them from their

peers. In this she acknowledges the importance of parental support for practising sight words, as well as the value of praise, encouragement, and animation.

Melanie Zanki's concerns in Chap. 7 are broadly similar, but in the context of an Indigenous classroom. More than the others she details the multimodal teaching strategies she used, having students do such things as running to the correct word on the floor when it was called out and copying out the words using clay and shaving cream. She also presents a record of just how much the students improved; even without a control group for comparison, this can seem significant in view of how little the students seemed to have been progressing earlier.

Some readers may be surprised that Melanie bothered to suggest that her results highlighted the fact that the 'gap' in Indigenous education is not genetic, since they would not have expected a genetic basis for it anyway. However, one can find popular opinion to the contrary, e.g., that 'The gap will never be closed, because it is ingrained in our genetics (at least to some extent)' (GM 2016). Even some research can appear to suggest that at least a small portion of the gap is due to racial factors (e.g., Leigh and Gong 2008).

Tim Caire has quite different concerns in Chap. 8, namely the pros and cons of giving students free choice in what they read as against having the teacher select readings. His own exploration of this found only one difference, namely that students given a free choice found their books more challenging, but from research by Carver and Leibert (1995) this seemed irrelevant to improving student's reading ability. Naturally the matter is more complex than can be resolved with such a simple study, and indeed, it may be a delicate matter of finding the right balance for each student. For example, while too much choice can actually be demotivating (e.g. Iyengar and Lepper 2000), to the extent individual students perceive teachers as controlling rather than autonomy orientated it can lower their feelings of self-worth, perceived competence, and intrinsic motivation to learn (e.g. Ryan and Grolnick 1986; Kohn 1993).

Shifting from literacy to language more generally, in Chap. 9 Angela Foulis presents an enthusiastic account on how learning an additional language can also help children learn about and come to appreciate the speakers and their culture. While her chapter is positive and generally well justified, specialists in the area might chaff at a few points, such as a student's stereotyping of Indonesians as living 'in huts not houses'. Furthermore, research by Ingram et al. (2004, p. 11–12) actually found no general correlation between the study of languages and cultures and positive attitudes towards other cultures; apparently it depends heavily on just how these are taught. As for the 'incredibly vibrant and inviting' Indonesian classroom Foulis describes, it is regrettably common for such languages to be taught by visiting teachers using classrooms borrowed from teachers who can then take a break from teaching (see e.g., *Attitudes towards the study of languages in Australian schools* 2007, p. 54). Note also that specialists in the area have generally abandoned Foulis' term 'Languages Other Than English (LOTE)' in favour of 'languages education' in order to avoid the notion of 'otherness'.

In Chap. 10 Amber Whittaker writes of her experiences in bilingual schools and explores the extent and ways students in mainstream multicultural schools are also

able to use their first languages. The value of such an ‘additive’ approach to linguistic and cultural incorporation has of course been known since the work of Cummins (e.g., 1986). Unfortunately, while the research literature also makes a strong case for bilingual education as well (e.g., Grimes 2009), that has been receiving less and less government support, at least in the Northern Territory (e.g., Devlin 2011).

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