EARLY YEARS STRATEGIES

READING TO LEARN
Accelerating learning and closing the gap
ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book outlines a set of teaching strategies that can ensure that every child is reading independently and writing coherently within the first year of school. In R2L, the context for learning these skills is the book that the class reads in Shared Book Reading. All the language skills come from shared reading books, that children understand and enjoy. Sentence Making, Spelling and Sentence Writing are used for introducing children to the skills of reading and writing. They address the outcomes of traditional activities such as phonics, phonemic awareness, letter formation, sight words and spelling, but in a carefully designed sequence, integrated with meaning at all levels.
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TEACHING READING AND WRITING IN THE EARLY YEARS

An integrated sequence of learning activities

In Book 1 we looked at how R2L integrates the learning tasks of reading and writing in a planned sequence of activities. The sequence begins by preparing students to engage with whole texts, and then prepares them to practise all the components of reading and writing in that meaningful context.

In the early years, the R2L approach to reading and writing starts with Shared Book Reading, which prepares children for reading. In Shared Book Reading, teachers tell the children what the story is about as they read through it, using the pictures. (There is an example on p14-16 below.) This is also what parents do as they read with young children. If children enjoy the story, parents will read and talk about it over and over again. Early years teachers also read a book many times in Shared Book Reading, until the children know it well and can recite its words.

Word recognition

Once the children know the story, and can recite at least some of its sentences, we teach them to recognise each of the words as they say them. This is done by writing one or more sentences on cardboard strips and showing the children how to point at each word as they say it. As they already know the sentence well, they rapidly learn to point and say the words accurately.

Their recognition of each of the words in a sentence can then be strengthened by Sentence Making activities - guiding them to cut up sentences into groups of words, mixing them up and putting them back together in sentences again. The children do not need to spell the words yet, but they can recognise the words because they can say them, they know what they mean, and they can see differences between them, such as first and last letters.

Spelling, letter formation and sounds

Once we are sure that children can recognise all the words in the sentence, both when they are in the sentence and out of the sentence, we can teach them to spell some of these words. This is done by showing children how to cut up words into their letter patterns, and how to write letter patterns and words, on their own small whiteboards or blackboards. We can also show them how to form letters accurately as they practise spelling.

Writing

When they can spell all the main words in one or more sentences, they can practise writing the sentences on their boards. We can help them to do this by reminding them of the sentence, or showing them some of the other words they have not practised spelling. This activity is called Sentence Writing. Its purpose is to practice the skills of writing fluently, including hand writing, spelling, and checking that they have not missed out words, until these skills are automatic.

Once spelling and writing skills are automatic, we can support children to start writing new stories. This is done by following the sentence patterns of the shared reading book very closely, but using new content, such as characters, activities, descriptions and so on. This is called Rewriting the text.

Each of these steps is shown on the R2L video called Early Years. The video shows Aboriginal teachers working with children who have not learnt to read by Year 2-3. Using the R2L strategies, the children all start to read and write within one hour of practice. Let's now look at each step in more detail.
SHARED BOOK READING

Shared Book Reading teaches children that reading is a meaningful shared activity, and that books can tell stories that give pleasure. The teacher reads a story with the children many times and explains it so they understand it, enjoy it, and can recite all the words.

The aim is to make reading fun and easy. Start by talking through the pictures, point out all the things that are going on, ask the children what they can see in the pictures, draw their attention to the important elements, and what is happening in each step in the story.

Children’s picture books are designed for shared reading between parents and children. They use repeated patterns, and funny stories that parents usually have to explain to children (see p20-22 below). So do the reading as you would with your own children.

Be careful to ask questions of individual children by name, instead of the whole class, so that everyone continually participates and gets affirmed. But be careful not to ask ‘guess-what’s-in-the-teacher’s-head’ questions, that children can’t answer, or you can’t affirm.

RECOGNISING WORDS & MAKING SENTENCES

Once all children can understand and say the words in the story (or at least part of the story), they can easily learn to read the words, sentence-by-sentence, with the following four steps.

1. One-for-one word recognition

This activity enables children to recognise the correspondence between the words they can say in the story, and their written forms in a sentence. The teacher shows the children how to recognise each word as they read it, by pointing to the words and saying them as they read. This is done using cardboard strips so the children can say and point to the words easily.

Read the sentence two or three times, point slowly and say the words clearly, so the children can follow you. You can hold their hand and point to each word as you and the child say them together.

Do this two or three times until the child is pointing to the words and saying them at the same time. Then the child can point to each word themselves as they say the words.

They can do this because they know the meanings of the words and their sequence in the sentence. As they point and say, they are learning to distinguish each written word, as they can already distinguish spoken words, and they are starting to recognise differences between each word in the sentence.
2. Cutting up word groups

This activity reinforces children’s recognition of words, within chunks of meaning in a sentence, such as who it’s about, what they are doing, where and when.

Once all children can say and point to each word accurately, they are ready to start pointing at each group of words in the sentence and cutting them off.

Ask them to say the first group of words and point to them. You can say the words yourself, or prompt them with ‘who it’s about’, ‘what doing’, ‘where’, etc. Then they cut the words off the strip, put them back in the sentence and read the sentence again.

Then ask them to say and point to the next word group in the sentence and cut them off. Then do the same for the last word group in the sentence.

Then the children put the sentence back together. Ask them to say the words as they put them down. Then they can say the whole sentence to themselves, to help them remember the sequence of words.

3. Making sentences

Children now get more practice in recognising the words by mixing up the cards, and putting the sentence back together again.

It's very important to allow the children to do the activities themselves, as much as possible. You can guide them by re-reading the sentence and showing them how to check for meaning. Let the children point themselves as they read the words.

Keep doing this until all children can put the sentence back together accurately, and read it. The manual practice is a powerful tool for young children to reinforce their learning of language. It puts them in control of their own physical activity, which gives them control of their own mental activity.

4. Recognising words in and out of the sentence

Once they can put the sentence back together, check that each child can recognise each word by itself, first in the sentence, and then out of the sentence. This step is essential before spelling activities. Spelling will only work effectively with words that children already know.

Use the content words for this activity as these are most meaningful - not structure words like the, and, there, as these are only meaningful when put together with content words.

First name a content word and ask the children to point to it in the sentence. Then take the content words out of the sentence, show the children each one and ask them to name it.
SPELLING

Children practise spelling the words they know by cutting them up into their letter patterns.

As well as spelling patterns, this activity teaches sound-letter correspondences, in the context of words that children can already recognise, know the meanings of, and can say fluently.

Show the children how to cut up words into syllables and Onset and Rhyme, such as ‘cr’ and ‘ook’ (see Intensive Strategies in Book 5). Then they practise writing on their own whiteboards, each letter pattern in turn. This makes it easier for them to remember each letter pattern at a time, before they try writing the whole word.

Use the ‘look-cover-write-check’ strategy. Show them the letter pattern first, ask them to say it, then turn over the card and let them write it from memory. Then let them check for themselves, without telling them that they have made mistakes.

When they can remember each letter pattern they can write the whole word. Show them the word, then turn over the card and let them write the word from memory. Then let them check and correct their spelling for themselves. As they check the word, ask them to say it again out loud, and then practise writing it again and again.

Forming Letters

If children have problems forming letters, show them how to write the letters properly. For example, show them how to keep the pen on the board, always start at the top, and go ‘down-up-and around’ (b, h, m, n, p, r) or ‘around-up-and down’ (a, d, g, q).

Watch what they are doing and show them on your own board. Let them practise doing it many times. They can always rub it out and do it again if they need to.

Once they can write the first letter pattern well, they can practise writing the next letter pattern. Then they can write the whole word. You can always show them the letter patterns again to help them remember.

(Always praise, never criticise.) When they get it right, they can write the letter pattern again and again to help remember it, and practise forming the letters.