

# Preface

This short book is intended to be both an advocate for and a guide to a new approach to teaching literacy. What is new about the approach is tied up with the ways it uses feelings and images; metaphors and jokes; rhyme and rhythm; stories and wonder; heroes and the exotic; hopes, fears, and passions; hobbies and collecting; and much else in engaging the imaginations of both teachers and learners with literacy. Literacy, and its associated cognitive tools, is one of the great workhorses of our culture, and it can greatly enrich the lives of those who learn to use it well. What this book does, then, is show how we might better teach our students to use this great cultural tool kit for their immediate, future, and everyday benefit.

## Two Sources of This Approach

A part of the novelty of this approach is that it draws on the work of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) and extends what he called cognitive tools for use in daily literacy instruction. What are cognitive tools, you may ask? The short answer is that they are *features of our minds that shape the ways we make sense of the world around us*; the richer the cognitive tool kit we accumulate, the better the sense we make. A slightly longer answer is that the term *cognitive tools* is commonly used to refer to what might more accurately be called *tools of imaginative engagement*. Several of the tools introduced later involve emotions and other features of thinking that are not products of the mind in the same way that metaphor and hyperbole are, for example. As used here, *cognitive* is a loose descriptor for the tools that engage our minds.

The particular tools we pick up influence our interpretations of the world around us, just as lenses influence what our eyes see. The lenses or cognitive tools mediate how we can see and make sense

of things. If we want to understand how and what we can learn, then, we should focus our attention on those cognitive tools. Our educational challenge is how to stimulate, use, and develop these tools to enhance students' understanding and their literacy skills—and that's what this book aims to show you how to do.

Vygotsky's work (e.g., Rieber & Wollock, 1997; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978) suggests a new approach to teaching literacy, because his idea of how human beings develop intellectually is fundamentally different from the way we have been accustomed to think of the process in the West since the time of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778).

Another source for this approach involves studies of thinking in traditional oral cultures. I recognize that this might seem a rather unusual place to look to for help with everyday literacy teaching today, but I hope you'll stick with me as we explore what this seemingly indirect route to literacy instruction has to offer. Clearly, children and adults in the West who come to literacy classes cannot be considered in any simple sense like people who live in oral cultures. For one thing, the environment of the modern nonliterate child or adult in the West is full of literacy and its influences. But despite this, many of the cognitive tools we find in oral cultures, such as storytelling and rhyming, help us to understand how literacy instruction might be made more imaginatively engaging to students. Even very briefly exploring some of the cognitive tools of oral language can yield a number of practical techniques.

## **Cognitive Tools in Everyday Teaching Practice**

*Teaching Literacy* takes seriously the idea that there is an alternative way to think about how children learn, a way that is somewhat different from the traditional and progressive approaches that have dominated education for so long. This new approach leads readers down a different road from phonics, whole language, and even the more nuanced attempts to combine them, which are so prevalent today. You will learn what you can do in practice by developing the array of Vygotsky-inspired cognitive tools and how to adapt them for today's learners in light of recent research (Imaginative Education Research Group, 2005). Kept to a minimum, the theoretical underpinnings of this book's approach have been published previously (Egan, 1997).

## Literacy Learners, Young and Old(er)

An oddity of this book is that it addresses literacy learning for both children and adults. These are commonly considered to be rather different fields. But in Vygotsky's terms, the cognitive tools we have—such as those that come along with oral language and with literacy—are crucially important in influencing learning. There will inevitably be some differences between nonliterate children and adults learning to read and write, if only due to the differences in the range of experience they have had. This is particularly true when those experiences have been frustrating for nonliterate adults and have made them resist further literacy learning. But this approach brings into focus the many more features children and adults have in common in learning literacy than have been typically recognized in the past.

### The Cognitive Tool Kits of Language and Literacy

What do these cognitive tools look like?

In Part I we dive into the cognitive tools that are commonly found in oral cultures and that remain common today. Teachers can get a better grasp on how to help people learn literacy by understanding the tools that underlie it and from which it emerged historically and from which it emerges now. Examples of how each of these tools can be used in everyday literacy teaching will be applied to the following:

- *The story*—this is one of the most powerful tools for engaging the emotions in learning.
- *The flexible use of metaphor*—this is crucial for flexible and creative literacy.
- *Vivid images*—generating images from words is central to engaging the imagination in learning.
- *Binary opposites*—this is a powerful organizing tool, common to nearly all early childhood stories.
- *Rhyme and rhythm*—these are potent tools for aiding memory and for establishing emotional meaning and interest.
- *Jokes and humor*—certain jokes can help make language “visible” and greatly aid awareness and control of language.
- And some others are included, too.

These tools are most prominently used by children between the ages of three through seven. I offer an age range because different children in different circumstances differ in (1) the time it takes, (2) the degree of fluency, and (3) the control they develop in using these tools. These tools do not go away with literacy development, but literacy affects them in ways we explore in the second half of the book.

Part II focuses on the tools that move students from early acquisition to fluency. Here we focus on the two to four years *after* literacy instruction begins, when students come to read and write reasonably well but have not yet become at ease with more complex forms of literacy. As a result, the tools in Part II apply primarily to children from the ages of six through ten. Every teacher knows that the range of attainment in any class during these years is quite wide. While I've listed a small age range, keep in mind that the tools allow some latitude for their applicability, as you'll see. Frequent examples are given of how the following tools can be easily used in teaching literacy:

- *"The redefinition of reality"* (Bruner, 1988, p. 31)—in which students' interest in content shifts in subtle and important ways
- *Engagement by the limits of reality and the extremes of experience*—in which students develop a fascination with the exotic and extreme, as, for example, in the *Guinness Book of World Records* (2002)
- *Associations with the heroic*—which gives confidence and enables students to take on, to some degree, the qualities of the heroes with whom they associate
- *Seeing knowledge in terms of human qualities*—recognizing that all knowledge is human knowledge and a product of someone's hopes, fears, and passions, making the world opened by literacy more richly meaningful
- *Collecting items or developing a hobby*—grasping securely some feature of reality can stimulate many literacy activities
- *The sense of wonder*—capturing the imagination in the worlds that literacy opens up, both real and fictional
- And some others

At the conclusion of almost every chapter in the book is a section called "Teachers, Try It Out." These sections present readers with various challenges to apply the chapter's concepts in everyday classroom practice. Teachers are encouraged to give the challenges a go on their own, but those looking for additional help can find an extensive variety of possible applications in the Appendix.

## Planning Frameworks Using Cognitive Tools

Part III demonstrates how the principles established earlier can be used to design frameworks to assist the teacher in planning literacy lessons and units. Sample frameworks are provided for teaching such everyday topics as homonyms and the use of the comma. These frameworks involve using many of the tools in combination. They might be seen simply as organized reminders of the tools the teacher can count on to engage the students' imaginations and emotions in the topics at hand.

Having begun this introduction with a bold declaration, I should finish it by more modestly noting that I don't envisage the practices and techniques I describe as displacing the many excellent practices and techniques currently in place. And, indeed, a number of items will be familiar, as they are already much used; for example, can we consider the use of the story as a new idea for teaching literacy? Of course not. Good teachers use a number of these practices intuitively. What I intend to show is how we might *routinely* achieve in the everyday classroom what currently requires rare intuition and energy.

The ideas and practices described in this book are also derived from the research and experimentation of the Imaginative Education Research Group, whose Center is at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia, Canada. You can find further material, and many more examples of lesson and units plans, on their Web site, at <http://www.ierg.net>. The names of the teachers and students you encounter in this book have been changed to protect their privacy.