# Reading to Learn, Reading the World: How Genre-based Literacy Pedagogy is Democratizing Education

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**Reading to Learn, Reading the World – How genre-based literacy pedagogy is democratizing education.**

Claire Acevedo, David Rose & Rachel Whittaker (Eds.)

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The aim of *Reading to Learn, Reading the World* is to showcase the many global contexts in which the Reading to Learn (R2L) pedagogy has been successfully applied to reduce the attainment gap and to make access to educational opportunity more equitable. Sixteen of the seventeen chapters describe case studies of R2L across six continents, with the initial chapter providing an overview of the approach. Even more impressive than the geographical reach is the scope of educational contexts and variety of subjects that have benefitted from this pedagogy. Many of the contexts are not directly related to English language teaching (ELT), but the volume raises some key questions for ELT practitioners which are examined below with examples from the book.

The overview by Rose (Chapter 1) briefly outlines the Reading to Learn (R2L) pedagogy (also Rose and Martin 2012) and lays the foundations for the remaining chapters. R2L encourages a sequence of scaffolding activities that aim to expose how the meanings of a text are made. The aim here is not to pass a 'comprehension' test but to observe (through working together) how the text, the images, the paragraphs within the text and the words and sentences in the paragraphs, make meaning. Students can then use these resources to generate new versions of the text, again working together at first before producing a version independently. That is, learning to read and learning to write are part of the same pedagogic cycle.

To achieve this, teachers need to select suitable texts to achieve curricular goals, understand how meaning is made in these texts, and plan a teaching cycle for working with them. For English language teachers, some aspects of the teaching cycle will seem familiar, while others may appear counter-intuitive. Figure 1 outlines the main (outer ring) and focussed (inner rings) stages in the R2L teaching cycle. Main stages can be expanded by using activities from the inner circles (e.g. Joint Rewriting). Alternatively, these activities can be practised as a second or third cycle, moving from a general (outer ring) to a more specific (inner ring) study of the text. Only the outer circle contains obligatory stages. Combining elements of the teaching cycle enables a complex variety of teaching strategies that adapt to text, to teaching context and to students' needs.

The cycle starts with Preparing for Reading (marked 1 in Figure 1) by raising interest in the content, previewing ideas such as a key concept from the text, and/or pre-teaching of lexis, grammatical patterns, collocations and/or multi-word units. This level focuses on the overall text, including appearance, images and headings. This stage can be

expanded to include a Detailed Reading of the whole text or part of it, which may also bring lexico-grammatical meanings, generic tendencies, concepts and more to students' awareness. The Detailed Reading stage and the Sentence Making stage can also be implemented in a subsequent second or third cycle (marked 2 and 3 in Figure 1).
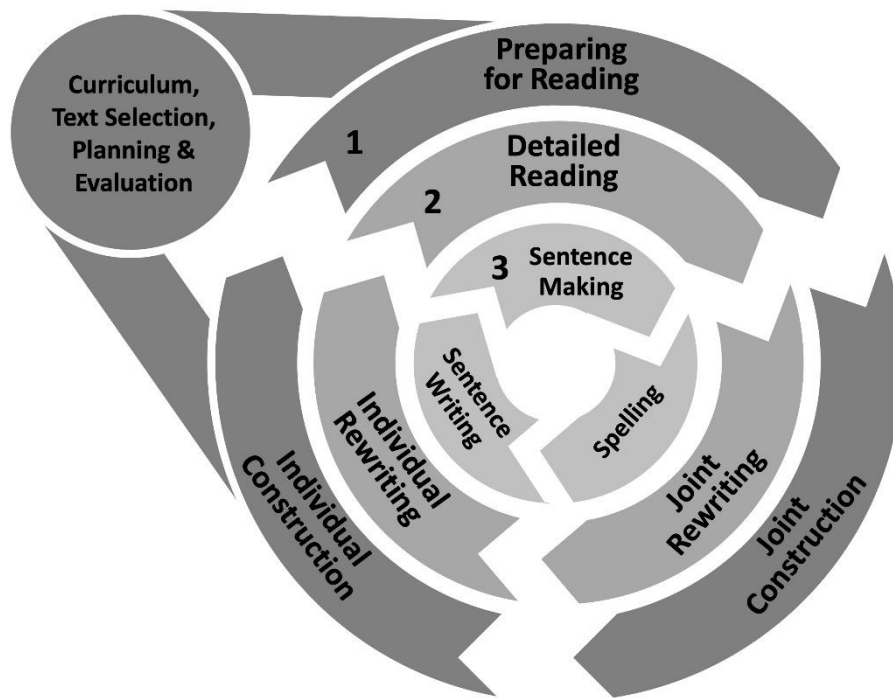
Figure 1. Major and focussed stages in the R2L cycle (image courtesy of the editors).

Joint construction – typically a whole-class activity – combines how meanings are made in a genre, represented by the current text, with learning to write, in order to produce a variation of the text. On the text level, joint construction activities may use plans or summaries to elicit the structure and meaning of the whole text, while paragraphs and sentences can be worked on within the text.   The text may also exemplify specific language issues, such as spelling.

The third main stage is Individual Construction, which allows students to transfer their understandings to a new context and at text, paragraph and sentence and/or word level to make their own meanings. That is, while this is called Reading to Learn, the pedagogy develops both the reading and writing of a genre. The approach to teaching reading in R2L is meaning-focused.  In R2L, a reading text is seen as a learning resource rather than fixed meanings encrypted in a passage to provide answers to comprehension questions that prioritise randomly selected information. This approach encourages reflection on ELT materials and coursebooks I have used that barely distinguish between the teaching and testing of reading.

Stretching back to its roots in the application of genre pedagogy in bilingual classrooms in Australia (Rose, Chapter1; Rose and Martin, 2012), R2L has worked to reduce the

attainment gap in literacy that correlates with the social privilege gap. Each remaining chapter in *Reading to Learn, Reading the World* provides a case study outlining how R2L achieved its aim of closing the attainment gap in a variety of classrooms: EFL, EAL/ESOL, bilingual, multilingual, special needs (Chapter 7), mainstream English language, or other subjects including maths (Chapter16) - or a combination of these such as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) (Chapter10; Chapter17 and Kartika-Ningsih 2024). The authors here claim that closing this attainment gap is democratising classrooms around the world; R2L exposes the linguistic advantages that privilege brings and makes them accessible to all.

R2L's continuing and considerable results in reducing educational inequality are attested in a number of chapters in this volume. In one case, 92% of students improved their literacy performance after following R2L in schools in Victoria, Australia, with up to 45% of students doubling their expected rate of literacy development (Cullican, Chapter 3). Two decades of using R2L have persuaded Cullican that it "remains the single-most significant and 'game-changing' classroom pedagogy I have ever encountered, and one from which, happily, I will continue to learn" (p.59). Similar results are reported by Carusi-Lees (Chapter 4) across a whole school in Brisbane, Australia. In South Africa, Millin (Chapter 6) not only provides evidence of improvement in literacy for secondary and tertiary students who experienced R2L pedagogy, but also points to counter-evidence from one institution that chose to stop the programme. As it reverted to traditional teaching methods, gains in students' results also went into reverse.

Many of the remaining chapters demonstrate the adaptability of R2L. In the USA, Ramírez and Gutiérrez (Chapter 12) adapted R2L to a CLIL setting for bilingual Lantinx immigrants. As well as extending educational opportunity into the community, the programme also innovated the R2L cycle to include a Preview – View – Review cycle that enabled a principled integration of translanguaging into the pedagogy. In Portugal, despite encountering tensions with existing uses of 'genre' in pedagogies practiced across the country, Gouveia, Filipe Alexandre and Caels (Chapter11) report that collaborative research between teacher educators and practicing teachers supports the continuing implementation of R2L. Lövstedt (Chapter 7) worked with teachers in the bilingual Manilla School in Stockholm, Sweden, to optimise R2L for students who are deaf or have significant hearing loss. In Chile, Westhoff and Olfos (Chapter 16) demonstrate how R2L pedagogy is relevant to all subjects by applying it to teaching mathematics. They pay particular attention to the sequence of Prepare–Focus–Task–Evaluate–Elaborate when adapting R2L to the Concrete-Pictorial-Abstract model derived from the Singapore maths method. Westhoff and Olfos claim that the R2L model allows teachers to increase the time spent on modelling mathematical methods.

Key to sustaining success is the central role of professional development. R2L is no quick fix. Each case study pays testimony to the determination and inspiration of the trainers in R2L, including the three editors (Rose, Chapter 1; Acevedo, Chapter 9;

Whittaker, Chapter 10). Their enthusiasm and professionalism have produced a team of experts who learned as professionals facing specific pedagogical challenges, through a Professional Development programme, reflexive practice, and sufficient resources. From their regional teacher support centre in Gothenburg, Sweden, Andersson Varga, Mitiche, Sandberg and Staf (Chapter 8) focused on underachieving schools to develop a Professional Development programme. The two years of R2L support they provided for participants and the support of the hierarchy in each school were central to success. TeL4ELE was a pan-European project set up by Acevedo (Chapter 9) and is represented here by four chapters. The "large scale, multilayered, multilingual project in different educational cultures" (p. 144) demonstrated that capacity-building and diversification at the trainer level was central to the R2L pedagogy adapting to each of the different contexts. The programme also modelled its own practices by scaffolding teachers' development in an 'I do - We do - You do' sequence to reflect the R2L cycle. The Spanish team in TeL4ELE used action research projects in initial teacher education in first and second language classrooms (Whittaker, García-Parejo and Ahern, Chapter 10). In Argentina, Meehan, Gaido, Anglada and Belén Oliva (Chapter 14) aim to spread their success in training teachers to use R2L in secondary schools beyond Córdoba, where they are based, while in Mendoza, also in Argentina, Hassan and Boccia (Ch.15) are helping their trainee teachers to improve both R2L and the mandated cognitive reading programme.

Teaching contexts that will seem more familiar to *ELT Journal* readers include bilingual teaching in a Latinx community in USA (Chapter 12), academic literacies in a north Colombia university (Chapter 13) and bilingual EFL classrooms in Indonesia (Chapter 17). Each context demonstrates how R2L is a viable pedagogy for ELT. Álvarez Uribe, Barletta, Benítez and Rosado-Mendinueta (Chapter 13) provide a general academic literacies course (for credit towards their degree) for all students who do not pass an academic reading test, as well as offering faculty support to implement R2L pedagogy in all subjects. They report significant success, with the majority of faculty now using R2L across the university. For Kartika-Ningsih (Chapter 17), the influence of genre – the knowledge about how texts are structured according to their social goals – on the EFL curriculum in Indonesia offered a good starting point, but it was ultimately disappointing in delivering significant learning gains in EFL. Like many countries, Indonesia is highly multilingual (with about 300 recognised languages), and in most classrooms across the country these languages are used interchangeably. In this context, introducing R2L into classrooms where biology was taught in English, as part of a CLIL development in schools, was profound:

> "For Indonesian EFL classrooms, the R2L bilingual program … is innovative in addressing the challenge of multilingual classrooms, using both L1 and L2 systematically for L2 teaching. The intervention showed that the R2L methodology can be fine-tuned and recontextualised for different linguistic environments." (p.297)

With such resounding endorsements, perhaps we could ask why R2L, or any genre-based pedagogy, is rarely implemented in typical ELT contexts. A text-heavy approach could be one hurdle in classes that promote verbal communication, and is probably one reason that R2L is more common in multilingual schools and universities, where texts provide opportunities for "learning language, learning through language, learning about language." (Halliday, p.113).

We may also look to the significant professional development resources required. When we compare the situations described in *Reading to Learn, Reading the World* to many teachers' experiences in the ELT world, it is hard to imagine where funding would be found for such a sustained approach to professional development. In most industries, investment in product and staff development, sustainability and research are central to strategic planning. When ELT looks to support for research and staff development, it typically finds only public and independent organisations, rather than the companies that profit most, particularly in publishing and educational technology. While publishing companies have ballooned through acquisition and capital investment, with proceeds to shareholders also ballooning, proceeds that could be used for industry R&D (e.g. research bursaries, qualifications and training programme sponsorship) are directed towards product homogenisation and reducing innovation to a minimum (Yıldız and Harwood, 2024), leaving scarce public funds to sponsor research and ELT professionals to pay for their own gateway qualifications (Certificate, Diploma, Master's etc.). Until companies profiting from ELT reinvest more in the industry, the sustainability of the sector will remain in doubt, plagued by questions around professional status and impeded by little to no research funding.

When a collection like this provides such a strong argument for a specific pedagogy, it is right for scepticism to take a front seat. How many times has ELT fallen for the latest evangelist, only to regret throwing out a baby with its bathwater? But then, if the argument is strong, backed up by clear theories of language and pedagogy, and supported by evidence, perhaps it is time to consider how we can all improve the way we teach reading in a second or foreign language. I suggest that the seventeen successful case studies in varying educational contexts presented in *Reading to Learn, Reading the World* should be sufficient to convince all but the most sceptical.

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**The Reviewer**

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