Mountain or Mole Hill: The genre debate viewed from 'Down Under'

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Introduction

One of the major issues to engage Australian English teachers in recent times has been the "genre debate". The exchange between advocates, opponents and the indifferent, has been at times heated and less than helpful. This debate has continued fairly vigorously for the past five years. I have been asked to describe the debate and offer my reactions to it in the hope that teachers and educators in this country might not make the same mistakes that have been made in Australia. My involvement in the debate has been that of an anxious cynic, calling for careful consideration of the work of the key genre theorists. This has led to my written and verbal involvement in a number of public debates. The issues which I raise today represent my perception of where the genre debate has taken us.

The theory underlying the 'genre-based' approaches to writing development (as they have come to be called), was developed by Hasan (1978), Kress (1982), Martin (1985) and others as an extension of earlier work on register theory by systemic linguists including Halliday, Gregory, Ure & Ellis (see Reid, 1987). It appears to have been motivated, and hence have its roots, in the following assumptions:

- The 'Process Writing' movement has lead to the dominance of narrative and recount genres at the expense of other genres such as report, argument, exposition etc.
- 'Whole language' and 'process' approaches have implicitly drawn too sharp a distinction between process and product and have lead to the neglect of the latter.
- The stress given by Whole Language advocates upon the need for students to be given greater control, choice and say in their learning, has lead to the negation of the teacher's critical and central role in the classroom.
- While some students learn with minimal teacher intervention, others need more direct help.
- Teachers need to provide students with more explicit knowledge about language and how it is used.

My major purpose is not to attack these assumptions, although I could (and will indirectly), but rather, in sharing them I want to make it clear that the Australian debate about genre has been within its own distinctive social and political context. To attempt to apply the lessons learned from the Australian debate without an awareness of the assumptions driving the debate, may well lead to educators in this country needlessly covering unnecessary and largely infertile territory. I will return to these issues later.

1. What are genres anyway?

A genre is a specific type of writing. Most of us have heard the term used primarily with literary genres – poetry, novel, short story, drama. Or perhaps more specifically as legend, fable, fairy tale, historical fiction, science fiction, poetry, etc.

But the use that is being applied to the word genre by advocates in Australia is far more specific. The term is being used to refer to a "social process which has some purpose" (Collerson, 1988; p. 12). These genres it is argued arise within a specific culture.

As a result, a court hearing, church service or family meal could be considered genres. These genres may have variations from one event to another, but over multiple uses of specific genres (e.g. church service) there are certain predictable elements and an accepted sequence of activities (Collerson, 1988). The reason for this is that the activities are carried out with a specific purpose or goal in mind.

Christie (1985, p. 12) describes genres this way:

> ". . . any staged and culturally purposive activity leading to the creation of a text . . . to serve different social purposes."

Harrison & McEvedy (1987, p. 55) provide a more restricted definition but one which probably reflects more accurately the way the term genre has been applied:

> "By genre we mean the overall structuring of the text which characterizes different forms of communication."

By now there may be some confusion in your mind concerning the difference between *genre* and *register*. I am not surprised.

Halliday (1978, p. 32) describes register this way:

> "It refers to the fact that the language we speak or write varies according to the type of situation."

As well, he suggests that the theory of register attempts to:

> ". . . uncover the general principles which govern this variation, so that we can begin to understand *what* situational factors determine *what* linguistic features."

Halliday (1978, p. 33) argues that in order to understand register we need to understand context of situation. In this way, he suggests, we are able to predict the linguistic features that are likely to be associated with it. He sees context of situation as having three elements:

Field – the setting in which a piece of language occurs. This term embraces not only the subject-matter in hand but the whole activity of the speaker or participant in a setting (and other participants).

Tenor – refers to the relationship between participants. Not merely variation in formality, but such questions as the permanence or otherwise of the relationship and the emotional element within. This also incorporates issues such as relative status of the language users, age, how well they know each other etc.

Mode – refers to the channel of communication adopted. This is not only the choice between spoken and written medium, but involves much more detailed choices. For example, choices relating to the role of language in the situation.

Halliday suggests that these three factors together determine the register. Interestingly, an interest in purpose is rarely explicit in the early work on register, but nevertheless, it has a key influence upon register.

Harrison & McEvedy (1987, p. 54) make more direct reference to purpose, and define register as:

> "a particular variety of language that characterises a particular social situation. Its linguistic patterns reflect the purpose of the participants in coming together."

In this definition the authors foreground purpose, something that others have taken for granted. Harrison & McEvedy (1987, p. 55) in doing this then define genre more specifically as:

> ". . . the overall structuring of the text which characterizes different forms of communication . . .)"

Derewianka (1990, pp. 18–19) on the other hand tries

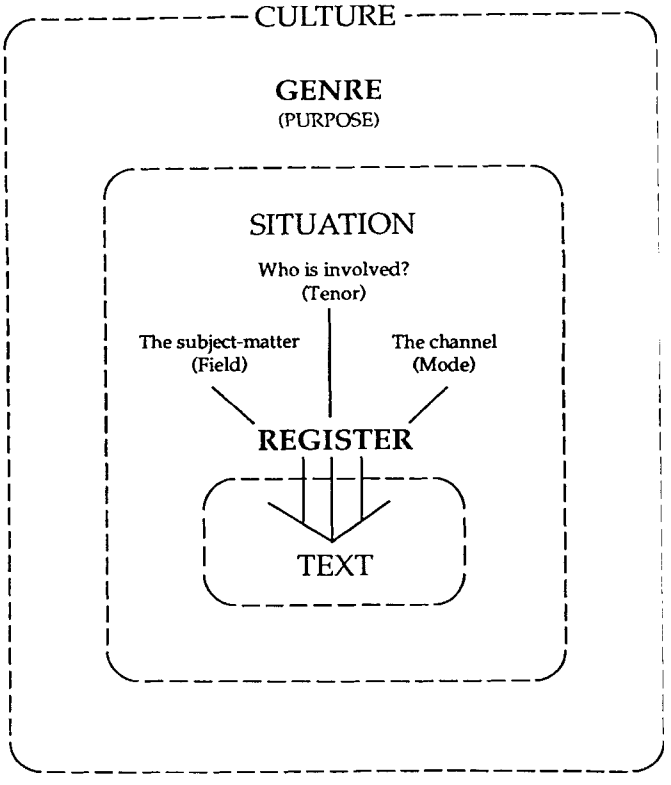

Figure 1: Derewianka's representation of language showing the place of genre.

to distinguish between genre and register mainly in terms of purpose (see Figure 1).

Derewianka is arguing that the term *genre* refers to the way the schematic structure of a text helps it to achieve its purpose.

The varying use and definition of the terms genre and register is confusing to say the least. On the one hand Harrison and McEvedy accept the critical role that purpose plays in affecting register, whereas Derewianka uses purpose as a major element within the definition of genre.

Clearly, purpose has an impact upon both register and genre. However, genre is concerned primarily with text structure. Martin, Christie and Rothery (1987, p. 59) define genre this way:

> "In essence genre theory is a theory of language use . . . it is a staged, goal oriented social process."

In trying to make genre theory accessible to teachers, many people have attempted to describe what they see as the common genres that people face in the real world, and hence presumably the genres that should dominate in school.

Collerson (1988), for example, outlines the genres he sees as most critical and divides them into two major categories: a) the early genres and b) the factual genres.

The following represents a summary of Collerson's major genres. This list is similar to many that have been suggested by various supporters of genre based approaches (see also Derewianka, 1990). As Collerson points out the list is not exhaustive, however, it is argued that it represents the major genres that students need to master if they are to succeed at school.

a) Early genres

i) Label – this is a simple statement which identifies something. For example "This is a big dog".

ii) Observation comment – the purpose of this genre is to provide information. It is often associated with a drawing, but is more than a simple label, usually consisting of several statements that provide information. For example:

> "My house is made of brick. It is two storey and is on a corner block. My mum doesn't like the small loungeroom."

iii) Recount – The purpose of a recount is to tell what happened. The main feature of this genre is that it presents a series of events in a time sequence. The opening clause usually sets the scene for the whole piece. For example:

> "Last week my mother had a new baby. She went into hospital just after I went to school. When I got home my nanna was waiting for me and she said my mother had gone to hospital. That night Daddy called and told me I had a new sister. Her name is Carol and she has lots of black hair. Tomorrow Mummy is bringing her home."

iv) Narrative – Like recounts, narrative involves a series of events in a time sequence, and is normally written in the past tense. But the feature that primarily distinguishes it from recount is that it normally includes a complication. That is, something always goes wrong. In the end the complication is resolved. A common outcome is that the major characters often live happily ever after.

b) Factual genres

i) Procedural (instructional) – This type of text is designed to tell someone something. It has a sequence of actions, and a structure involving a *goal* (in heading or a diagram), usually a list of *materials* (in order of use), and an outline of the *method* (steps towards the goal).

ii) Reports – The major purpose of a report is to document, organize and store factual information on a topic. The topic is usually introduced with an opening general statement, classification or definition. The rest of the report then consists of facts about the various aspects of the subject. For example:

> "The Funnel Web is a spider. It lives along the east coast of Australia. There are a number of types, but all are dangerous and can kill. It gets its name from the funnel shaped web that it makes. It likes to live around rocks or old wood. Its bite can kill a human within minutes. The spider is black or brown in colour and is about the size of a twenty cent piece. If bitten people should immediately be taken to the nearest hospital and be given the anti venom. If treated quickly most bite victims can survive."

iii) Explanation – The purpose of the explanation is to give an account of how something works, or reasons for some phenomenon. Collerson distinguishes the explanation from the report by suggesting it has "a process focus rather than a thing focus". It has a logical sequence and positions the reader (usually) with an opening statement about the phenomenon in question. This is then followed by a sequenced explanation of how or why something occurs. For example:

> "Animals have many ways that they protect themselves. Some use weapons such as stings, sharp claws, hooves or teeth. Others use poison to stun or kill their enemies or simply protect themselves with a special covering like a shell. One of the most interesting ways that animals protect themselves is through camouflage. Some animals have a colour, pattern or skin texture that matches their habitat. Others change their colour to match the surroundings. All these methods help animals to survive and escape the attacks of their enemies."

iv) Arguments (or exposition) – The purpose of this genre is to take a position on some issue and justify it. The major emphasis is on persuading someone to your point of view. The beginning of an argument usually consists of a position statement (or thesis) accompanied by some background information about the issue or question. The writer then presents the argument, which normally has more than one point. At some stage the writer may suggest a resolution to the argument. Finally there is an attempt to sum up the position. For example:

> "The Nepean river is currently threatened with becoming 'dead' and useless. It needs protection. On numerous occasions in recent years experts have found the Nepean river dangerously low in oxygen. This is due to pollution from residential run-off carrying fertilisers and other chemicals, sewerage, and pollution carried in rain water. There is only one way to stop this ongoing problem – decentralisation. If we continue to allow cities like Sydney to sprawl outwards we will find

inevitably that the waterways will not be able to cope with the wastes that eventuate. We must act now before it is too late."

2. Do we need such a detailed description of genres?

My first reaction five years ago was to say no! While the term genre used in the way described above has the advantage of stressing the importance of text structure, it offers little that was not at least implicit within the concept of register. For example, if one observes different texts that reflect a common register (e.g. an exchange between a customer and a shop assistant at a check-out), then you will also observe similar structure.

However, my more considered response, five years later, is to accept that genre theorists may well be right in insisting that teachers need to be more concerned about text structure. Furthermore, teachers may need to be more explicit when talking to students about language.

Do students learn the structure of specific genres simply by reading them and being invited to write for specific purposes? Some genre theorists say no, others claim that only some children do, and even then, only in a limited sense.

As a result, they suggest that teachers have a responsibility to introduce students to specific genres, provide models of these texts, and to jointly construct texts with students. I have difficulty with their perspective. First, I would argue that all children learn about genre through the experience of literacy itself. Second, I would suggest that many children need only limited help with this aspect of language.

I do accept however, that teachers have a responsibility to focus some attention on the written genres of language. But how is this to be done? While this question is only just being addressed, it is by far the most critical question. I would encourage English educators not to waste time arguing about the precise nature of genres, their number, incidence etc. Let the linguists do this. Nor, should educators and teachers bother to argue about the need to talk about written genres; this is hardly in doubt. The most important question is how should teachers talk about genres?

3. How should teachers talk about genres?

As I state above, the major issue to be addressed is what we should do with the knowledge about genre that we have been given? It seems to me that two sub questions emerge:

How explicit should we be when talking about language?

How should we use this knowledge to interact with our students as they write?

In the early work of Martin, Rothery, Christie and Kress, there seemed to be a lack of concern for pedagogy. Certainly, there was little attempt to explain or justify the pedagogy which seemed to be implicit in their work. The approaches they were suggesting were very teacher centred and text based. In response to an early paper of Martin's (1988a) I attempted to describe what I saw as the key differences between the pedagogy implicit within his work (see Cairney, 1988) and that which I used when interacting with students (see Table 1). While the dichotomy created by this comparison is perhaps a gross generalisation, it does serve to highlight several key differences. On the one hand, Martin adopts a fairly directive, teacher centred approach to discussing the features of language, with genre holding a central focus. On the other hand, I believe my concern is more meaning centred and allows the students to have a major role in the setting of the instructional agenda.

Martin (see Martin, 1988b) explains this difference by claiming that the variation in approach is mainly due to a different conceptualization of the role of scaffolding. In his case, he is more concerned to put the teacher in the role of expert, providing knowledge that the student does not. Presumably, he assumes that I see no role for the adult to provide knowledge that the child does not have. However, he misses my point. I accept that the teacher may have knowledge that the child does not possess, but I also assume that students may have knowledge that other students (and the teacher) do not have. Furthermore, I do not accept that the desire for a teacher to offer knowledge about language ever over-rides the need for the focus of classroom interaction to be upon meaning. In other words, I see meaning as central, not knowledge of text.

Clearly children do not simply learn about language by osmosis. Children learn about language in environments where they can read, write, and talk about reading and writing. This is not to say that readers and writers do not learn a great deal about language simply from the experience of reading and writing. On the contrary, they do (Meek, 1988). If you are not convinced look at the following bizarre example of the negative demonstrations that one of Australia's worst basal programmes provided for a year 2 child (see Figure 2).

This piece of writing is one of about 30 which were written in quick succession after this 6 year old student transferred into a new class following a family move. Each text was written in a personal journal which was shared with the teacher and other students. His teacher brought his writing to my

Table 1: A comparison of two alternative approaches to 'text talk' (from Cairney, 1988; 1990)

The right approach to text talk involves the teacher:	*The wrong approach to text talk involves the teacher:*
• frequently allowing students to choose the texts they wish to discuss;	always choosing the texts to be discussed;
• talking about text in response to students' attempts to make meaning;	initiating talk about texts irrespective of the students' level of interest or engagement;
• introducing students to new text forms as 'real' purposes for these texts arise;	introducing students to new text forms for school purposes only;
• using a variety of strategies to focus attention on text;	limiting the strategies used in questioning;
• providing knowledge about text as gaps in student understanding are observed;	providing knowledge about text as the teacher sees fit, according to assumed needs;
• using questions to stimulate thinking;	using questions primarily to test understanding;
• using open as well as closed questions;	using predominantly closed questions;
• providing inductive as well as deductive questions;	mainly providing deductive questions;
• offering students opportunities to contribute personal insights;	offering few opportunities to share insights;
• making meaning the primary focus of all discussion;	making aspects of text other than meaning the focus;
• seeking to find out what students want to know before talking about texts;	always deciding what children need to know for them;
• encouraging self-discovery;	discouraging self-discovery;
• providing opportunities for students to share insights in group situations.	limiting the opportunities for group sharing.

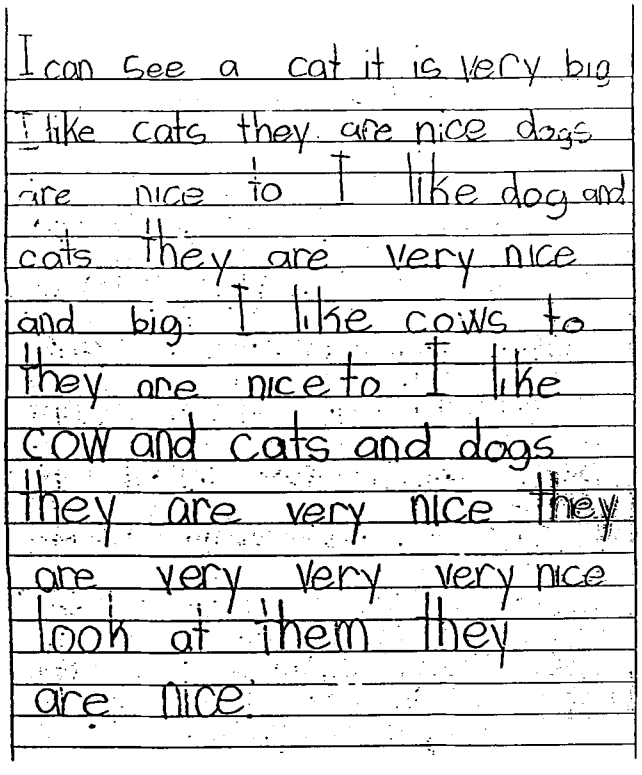
I can see a cat it is very big
I like cats they are nice dogs
are nice to I like dog and
cats they are very nice
and big I like cows to
they are nice to I like
cow and cats and dogs
they are very nice they
are very very very nice
look at them they
are nice

Figure 2: Writing sample from a child who had experienced a linguistically based basal reader.

notice because each text conformed to the same odd register and genre.

Upon investigation of his previous school experience, it emerged that his writing conformed to the texts of a basal reading scheme that he had used in his previous school. His teacher had used this material almost exclusively. This student had learned a great deal about language through the experience of reading this basal scheme.

However, while this example provides dramatic evidence of the way we learn implicitly through our experience of language, we learn also as we interact with others concerning our reading and writing. We need to do more in our classrooms than simply providing opportunities to read and write. We need to provide opportunities for our students to discuss writing in a variety of contexts (e.g. individual conferences, group conferences, class groups, partners etc), each designed to give them greater control over the language they use.

4. The teacher's role in 'text talk'

Recently I have spent a lot of time reflecting upon the way I talk to my students about texts. I have also

spent large blocks of time observing classroom teachers judged as outstanding teachers by their students, parents and peers. What has impressed me as I have attempted to identify the key features of 'text talk' in these classrooms is that it is a complex collaborative process involving interactions between teachers and students, and students and their peers. Furthermore, these interactions occur in a recursive cycle of demonstrations, joint text construction, independent reading and writing, and talk about language (see Figure 3).

An important aspect of this cycle is my role as a teacher. I am not simply a director, skills teacher, activity provider, or tester of text knowledge – in short, I do not spend my time interrogating texts.

Instead I am:

- an INFORMATION GIVER if the student has gaps in knowledge that are of vital importance to a purposeful task with which he/she is engaged;
- an INTERESTED LISTENER;
- a STRATEGY SUGGESTER if the student's existing strategies are not working;
- a SHARER of insights, successes, and problems experienced from reading and writing;
- a SUPPORTER when the student's best effort doesn't quite make it.
- a CRITICAL FELLOW LANGUAGE LEARNER when student performance is not up to expectations, when effort hasn't been applied, or when the point has been missed;
- an INTRODUCER to new language forms, new authors, new uses for writing, alternative writing styles, new language, writing topics, different purposes for writing, new audiences . . . ;
- a DEMONSTRATOR of real and purposeful reading and writing.

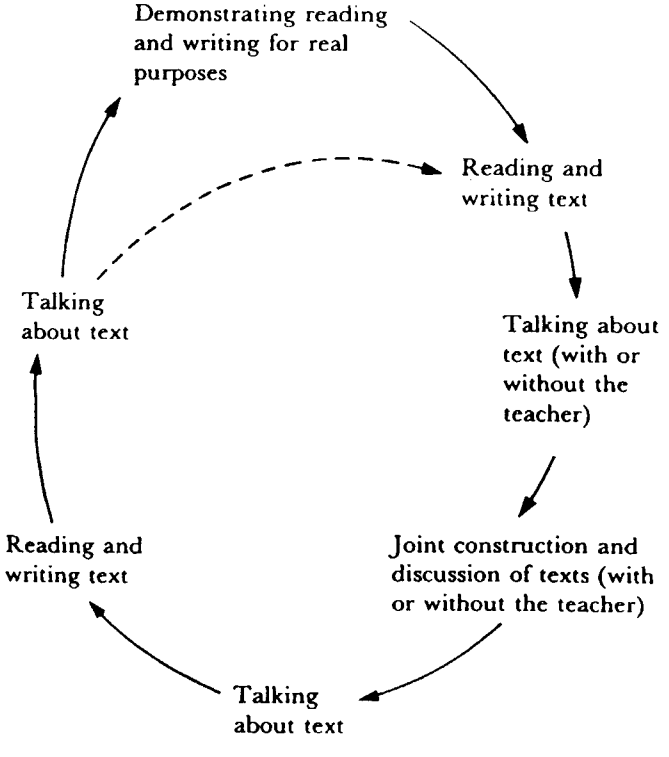

Figure 3: The 'text talk' cycle.

I believe that three things distinguish this role for the teacher from that of more skills-based teachers:

- Control over learning is not taken from the child;
- Meaning and purpose are the central concern;
- The teacher's major input comes as part of a complex scaffolding process of close interaction, not simply as a distant instructor.

What I am arguing for is a key and vital role for teachers as providers of essental scaffolding. Scaffolding is a concept developed by Bruner (1983) but traceable to the work of Russian psychologist Vygotsky (1978). As I pointed out earlier in this paper there has been some disagreement about the precise nature of scaffolding (see Gray, 1987). However, the definition used here is that it is a process that someone uses to help another language learner engage in learning beyond his/her "actual" level of development.

As such, scaffolding is not the preserve of adults. It can also be provided by other students, as long as they possess knowledge of language beyond the level of the learner who they are helping. Above all, scaffolding is a response to another individual's attempt to learn and make meaning. Hence, talk about genre should generally be in response to a student's attempt to make meaning. Talk about the structure of language makes little sense apart from a student's purposeful attempts to read or write something of personal significance. We must avoid at all costs the temptation to focus on genre as an end in itself. If our students are to be given new knowledge about the form of an argument, for example, this should be done within the context of their attempts to formulate an argument that is important to them as learners and language users.

Conclusion

The above discussion has served simply as an introduction to genre theory and genre based practices. There are many other issues which cannot be explored in depth. But before concluding let me mention just a few that I trust you will continue to debate and explore.

First, there is the issue of identifying genres. This may seem simple enough. But I have a concern. If one attempts to define a genre, it is assumed that one will need to define its elements. I question how uniform genres are over time, from situation to situation, from one use to another (even by the same writer). To define them too dogmatically is to run the

risk of imposing on writers sanitized forms. The history of writing suggests that genres change, and at times are deliberately modified for writer effect.

Second, once one identifies genres it is logical that some would want to teach them. I have spent a lot of time addressing this issue already. However, I want to re-emphasize my concern that attempts to teach genres may lead to decontextualized lessons about language with purpose and meaning being largely ignored. As I have argued above, I am concerned about any approach that runs the risk of placing structure before meaning. The field of education is riddled with legacies to instructional approaches which foregrounded specific aspects of language, e.g. the teaching of grammar, spelling instruction, story grammar and so on.

Third, the claim that there is too much emphasis on narrative form is a difficult one to answer. Furthermore, there is a very real danger that such claims will have a related impact on the use of personal writing. Britton et al (1975), Martin et al (1976) and Barnes (1976) have all shown us that learning is facilitated when students are allowed to use their own language to explore new understandings, rather than being forced to conform to the particular language conventions of specific subject areas. I trust that any reaction to the claims of the genre theorists do not ignore the role that language plays in learning.

Fourth, the work of Graves (1983) has shown that children write with greater power when given 'control' of their writing. One consequence of genre based approaches could be the wresting of control away from learners, back into the hands of teachers.

Finally, we need to question the assumption of genre theorists that genres can only be acquired if they are taught explicitly. Language research by people like Gordon Wells (1986) and Harste, Woodward and Burke (1984) has shown how language and literacy begins to develop at a very early age as children interact with significant others in their efforts to make meaning. What characterizes much of this literacy development is the extent to which children learn incidentally and informally.

In conclusion let me stress that I believe the teaching of writing has never been as good in the history of schooling as it is now. In fact, the advent of process writing was responsible for a dramatic increase in the importance of writing.

However, much more can be done. To help students more capably achieve the writing purposes that help them to make sense of their world, we need to be involved closely with our students as they write.

Our role as teachers of writing is a complex one. We need to be many things to many students. As I have shared already, we are Sharers, strategy suggesters, information givers, questioners, reactors, listeners. But above all, we must provide classroom contexts in which purposeful goal directed activities are central. Our students must be given explicit help with language as they attempt to use reading and writing to make sense of their world.

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