

Narrative Writing Intervention Plan: Analysis of Students' Literacy Learning Needs

Nur Amalia

Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta
nur.amalia@ums.ac.id

Abstract

Our conversations with friends, family and others, either by talking or writing, are in form of narrative. It is incontestable that narrative is a very important skill because basically our life is a narrative. However, telling narrative in a written form is often challenging for young people to do. Different conventions, such as spelling, grammar, and text structure, in writing require specific skills to encode spoken language and experiences into written language. The focus of this project is to target grade 5 and 6 students' narrative writing skills. Specifically, it focuses on finding out whether the disengaged writers are reluctant writers or struggling ones. The intervention project limits the focus of the assessments on students' attitude towards writing and students' selection and use of ideas to write a narrative piece. Nonetheless, assessments include students' narrative writing skills and the narrative features of their writings even though it would not be the main focus. A preliminary assessment was conducted to provide an insight why they are disengaged in writing narrative. Students were taught to understand narrative writing convention and were provided with several strategies to improve their narrative writing skills. Students work samples were collected and were analysed based on *First Steps Writing Developmental Continuum* (1997), *Culham's Traits Scoring Guide* (2009) and *NAPLAN Writing Narrative Marking Guide* (2010). These diagnostic tools gave clear map of students' capacity to organize a narrative, to include the reader, to build up ideas and to develop characters and settings. The project results teaching plans to escalate students' confidence in writing narrative and to develop an awareness of narrative features and structure. It also finds that a supportive learning environment is the key for students' learning.

Keywords: Narrative, Struggling Writer, Intervention Plan

INTRODUCTION

Communication between friends, family members and others are made up of stories. We share our life experience to other people, either by talking or writing, in form of narrative. Thus, it is incontestable that narrative is a very important skill to have because basically our life is a narrative. For students, having the ability to comprehend and express stories is as vital to life as it is to academic success. However, telling narrative in a written form is often challenging for young people to do. Christie (2005, p.63) argues that different conventions in writing '*distance the writer from the events and/or experience and information written*'. Therefore, they need skills to encode spoken language and their experiences to written language that has different conventions such as spelling, grammar and text structure. In order to become a proficient writer, students need to have *graphophonic*, *syntactic* and *semantic* knowledge (Harris, McKenzie, Fitzsimmons & Turbil, 2003: p.17).

Hill (2009, p.283-286) divides children's writing development in six stages; *beginning writing*, *early-emergent writing*, *emergent writing*, *early writing*, *transitional writing* and *extending writing*. Similarly, First Steps Writing Developmental Continuum (1997) also has six phases, i.e. role play writing, experimental writing, early writing, conventional writing, proficient writing and advanced writing. The divisions show that children learn writing as early as when they use drawing to communicate a message or assign a message to own symbols until when they are able to

use different text types to achieve particular purpose with accurate written language conventions. When thinking about these stages in narrative writing, we may find children progress simply **from** drawing and orally recounting their experiences, writing a story but not giving sufficient background information, beginning to write a story using some narrative structure and time order, adding more background information as they start considering the needs of audience, manipulating their narrative writing to develop plot as they identify expected audiences, **to** controlling and manipulating written language components and narrative text features to enhance, develop and achieve impact (Education Department of Western Australia, 1997).

Grade 5/6 students, according to VELS standards and progression points, English – Writing in relation to Narrative writing, are expected to working towards level 4 standard: to produce a narrative writing text using structures and features of language appropriate to the purpose, audience and context of writing. Using a variety of strategies for writing such as planning and editing, they add details and correct written language conventions to show connectedness between sentences and paragraphs. They also begin to use simple figurative language and visual imagery. (VCAA, 2009)

In order to achieve this, grade 5/6s students need to be able to stretch out the answer of the basic questions of narrative text: what, when, where, who, why and how. The focus for this research is to targeting grade 5/6s students' narrative writing skills to find out whether the disengaged writers are reluctant writers or struggling writers and to assess students' narrative writing skills in order to find an intervention plan that supports those who have similar literacy and language learning needs in narrative writing.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research was conducted in one of primary school in a suburb area where many families were immigrants and therefore may have language other than English as their daily language. Participants consisted of four grade 5/6 students: two boys and two girls. The boys were from ESL background. They were at different reading and writing level but having similar needs in narrative writing; they needed assistance in finding and developing ideas as they often said "I don't know what to write" to their classroom teacher.

Annandale, Bindon, Handley, Johnston, Lockett, & Lynch (2003) states that assessment practices are effective when they are valid, educative, explicit, fair and comprehensive. Therefore, a range of assessment was conducted to fulfil those requirements and provide an authentic and effective assessment. In order to figure out students' attitude towards narrative writing and their understanding about narrative, the researcher observed, interviewed and provided think board sheets. The pre-assessments provided an insight why they are disengaged in writing narrative. Several diagnostic tools were used to assess students' narrative writing skills, i.e. First Steps Writing Developmental Continuum (FSWDC), Culham's Traits Scoring Guide "Using Benchmark Papers to Teach Writing with the Traits" (2009) and NAPLAN Writing Narrative Marking Guide (2010). These tools gave some visions on students' narrative writing level and guided the researcher to find students' strengths and needs in narrative writing, in terms of their capacity to organize a narrative, to include the reader, to build up ideas for their narrative, and to develop characters and settings.. First Steps was used to record what the students can actually do, in order to inform planning for further development. It gave an explicit way of mapping a student's progress through analysis of their work sample. Writing Developmental Continuum (Education Department of Western Australia, 1997) was also used to identify and plan for a personalized student learning and to suggest teaching emphases and a range of teaching and learning experiences for each phase of development.

The research limits the focus of the assessments on students' attitude towards writing and students' selection and use of ideas to write a narrative piece. Narrative features were assessed but linguistic features, such as spelling, sentence structure, etc., did not become the main focus.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

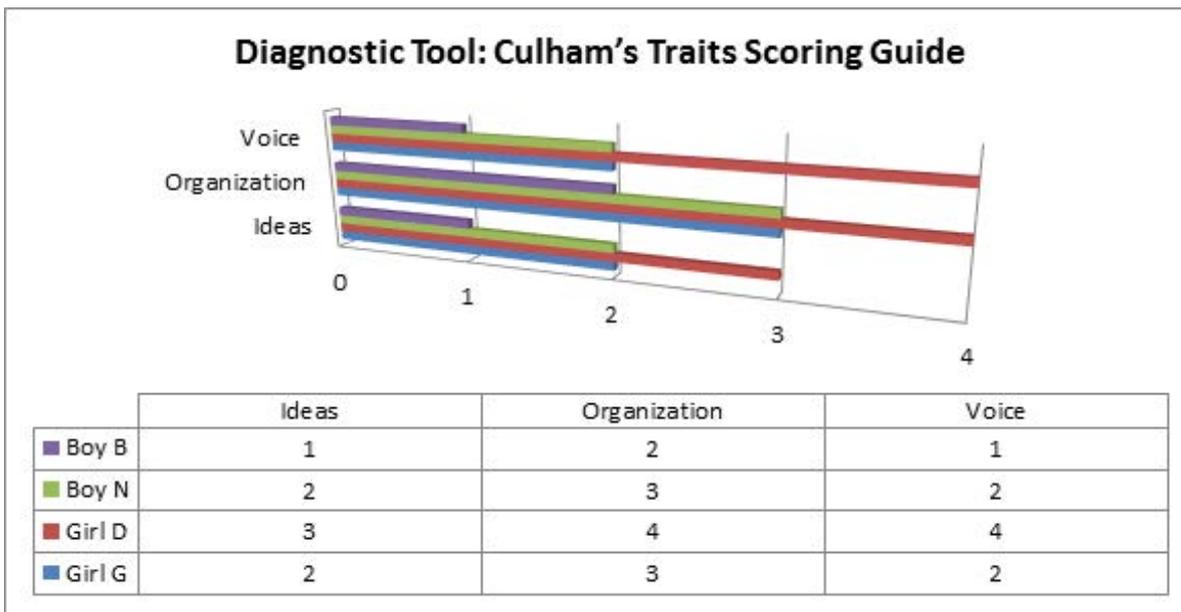
Pre-assessment and Students' Writing Diagnosis

From the think board and conversation with the students about what they know, feel and think about narrative writing, it appears that all of them find it boring. They are disengaged because they need to go through a lot of thinking process which is time-consuming and exhausting. Allington and Cunningham (2011, p.146) argue that 'the essence of writing is thinking'. Therefore for some students, writing is difficult as it requires them to think so many things at the same time. It can be concluded from the interview with the students that they are reluctant narrative writers mainly because they find it hard to get ideas for their narrative writing. One of the students said "I am not confident because I don't know what to write". The main reasons of the reluctance based on two diagnostic tools, Culham's Traits Scoring Guide and NAPLAN Writing Narrative Marking Guide, are 1) difficulties in finding ideas, 2) difficulties in expanding an idea and 3) fear of making mistakes (spelling) or fear of not having interesting words (vocabularies). There was a need to support their narrative writing skills in the areas of ideas, narrative structure and features and writer's voice related to audience.

In relation to this, Gibbons (2001) categorizes writers into two: effective writers and less effective writers. The first ones are confident to write a planning before starting writing, use the draft to develop their writing and manipulate the plan as they find one or more things need to be changed in order to make their writing more logical. "*They understand that writing is a recursive process—that writers continually revise and edit at all stages of the writing process, from first draft to final product*" (Gibbons, 2001: p.52). These writers enjoy the process of writing as they enjoy reading books. They are aware of the author-audience positions so they understand that writing is different to speaking and that they should use different language features to transfer their ideas to readers. By contrast, less effective writers or reluctant writers are not confident and are the ones who are struggling. One of the students in the group is always worried about her spelling and vocabularies and often stops writing to correct the 'mistakes'. As a result, she is not confident to write a long passage. All the students in the group are not able to plan at 'a whole-text' level (Gibbons, 2001) which is the biggest barrier that makes them reluctant. Two of them mentioned that it is hard to find ideas for their writing and they need more time to think. However, it is best to think of students' writing skills as on a developmental continuum.

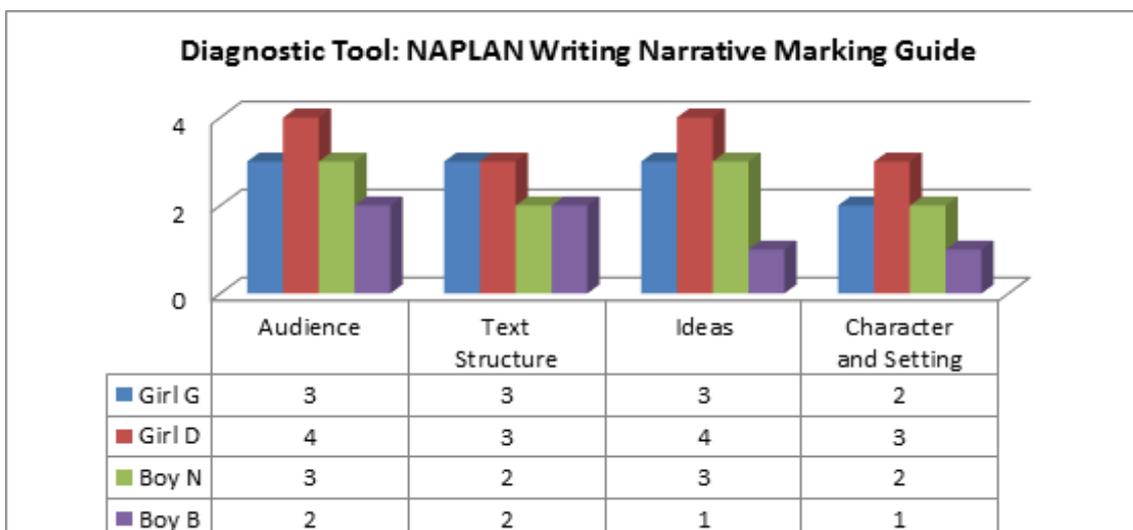
The FSWDC serves as the continuum, attributes students' progression in writing and provides explicit goals and clear instructions on what to improve and how to achieve it. Students' writing samples analysis shows that they fall in the '**Early Writing**' phase, progressing towards the 'Conventional Writing' phase. Some teaching strategies to teach them would be focusing on developing awareness of the purpose of writing and audience, sequencing sentences and paragraphs and exploring alternatives ways of expressing ideas. Considering this, students need to take more risks, be confident in narrative writing, comprehend narrative features and use time to self-edit their work.

Their writing samples were also analyzed using Culham's Traits Scoring Guide in three areas: *Ideas, Organization and Voice*. The result is summarized in a chart below:



Graph 1. Students' writing skills diagnosed with Culham's Traits Scoring Guide

The writing samples were also assessed using NAPLAN's Narrative Marking Guide in four areas: *Audience, Text Structure, Ideas, Character and Setting*. The data analysis is recorded in graph 2.



Graph 2. Students' writing skills analyzed with NAPLAN's Narrative Marking Guide

Students' Language and Literature Strengths and Needs

Referring to students' attitude towards writing, they are all struggling in writing narrative and are reluctant writers because of having difficulties in expanding their ideas for writing. When they were asked what they feel about writing and why, the main responses are "*I don't have any good ideas for my writing*" or "*It takes too long and I have to think*". However, some students' response indicates that they somewhat enjoy writing if they could find how to develop their story; "*it is fun if it was action*" (when he could add more actions for his main character, he enjoyed the writing process).

Based on students' writing sample analysis, they can answer basic questions of narrative writing and compose the answers of what, when, where and who into their story. All students understand the purpose of narrative and its organizational structure: orientation to set the scene and introduce characters, complication that lead to some kind of problem, and resolution to resolve the problem. However, the analysis suggests that they need to develop the organizational structure such as elaboration of complication, consistency of story, and more interesting resolution. For example, Girl D attempted to build a new complication but left the previous event with minimal details (NAPLAN's Marking: Level 3 for Text Structure).

In terms of ideas, three of them understand the importance of adding some details to attract the reader's attention. They are in a 'developing' stage for ideas (Culham's Traits Scoring Guide). In this stage, they elaborated their ideas in relation to a central story. For instance, Boy N developed his story by providing a sequence of connected ideas: A miracle – Defeated the demon as he got more power – Celebration. There is one student that perhaps needs to have more introduction of narrative text. Boy B in his think board wrote "I know in narratives there are paragraphs" and his writing shows a very basic narrative organizational structure.

Even though most of them begin to use elaboration strategy to develop their narrative text but it seems that they struggle to insert their voice and create emotions or feeling in to their writing. They may be able to answer the what, when, who and where but struggle to answer why and how. It is evident from the way they depict the character and setting. There is minimal elaboration of these two narrative features. Some of them used dialogues but it was used minimally. For example, Girl D described the character's dilemma by writing what the character thinks "What do I do with him?" and attempted to build up the tense of the story. They need to elaborate their writing by answering the why and how to create more impact upon the story.

3.3 Intervention Plans

From the assessment data analysis, it is important to re-engage students to enjoy writing narrative by putting the students at the center of the learning process. Gibbons (2001, p.57) refers this as a process approach and states that "*children learn to write most effectively when they are encouraged to start with their own expressive language, that "meaning" is more important than "form," and that writing should take place frequently and within a context that provides "real" audiences for writing.*" Therefore, encouragements to have the ideas written done is central. Students do not need to worry too much about spelling and other linguistic elements such as vocabulary that often stop them from writing. To balance this, they will be provided with opportunities to edit their work.

Gibbons also points out the importance of explicit teaching in writing and suggests the four stages of Curriculum Cycle to teach writing (2001, p.60). Related to this, Anderson (2003, 27) suggests some strategies to transform reluctant "*I don't get any good ideas*" writer into an eager one by the "Six As" approach: *Activate, Absorb, Adapt, Analyze, Apply* and *Assess*, that fits into Curriculum Cycle. The first four As are some steps that represent 'Building Up the Field' stage. Connecting reading and other background information or experiences into part of teaching writing will activate students' interest and engage them in the process. The *Apply* step can be branched out into 'Modelling the Text Type', 'Joint Construction' and 'Independent Writing'. The last A, *Assess*, will ensure that students know what are expected from their writing. When students know what to do and what are expected, they will be more motivated to learn.

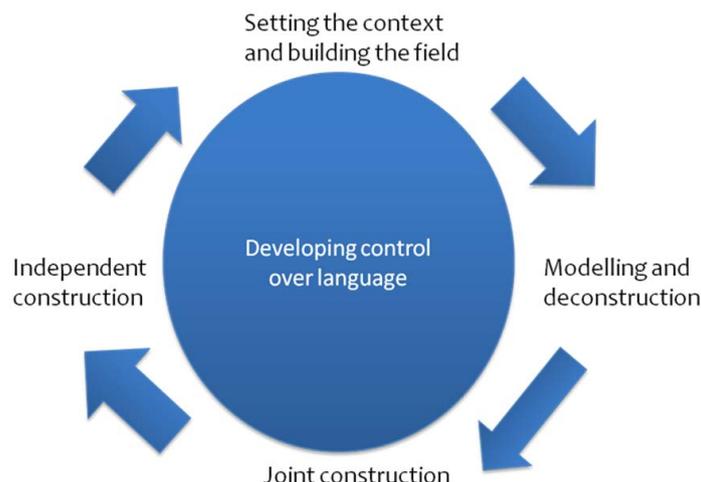


Figure 1. Gibbons' Curriculum Cycle (2001)

Teaching activities and strategies that are in line with Curriculum Cycle will be implemented. For example, PETA's "Writing {better} Stories" (2006) will be used as resources. The strategies in the book will be unpack and implemented to help students improve their narratives. Focused mini lessons such as effective beginning, characters' development, dialogues, and many more can be conducted to support students' elaborative skills for improvement in their narratives.

Proposed Teaching Model for Intervention Program

The first teaching strategies to teach reluctant narrative writers should be focusing on developing awareness of the purpose of narrative writing and the audience, sequencing sentences and paragraphs and exploring alternatives ways of expressing ideas. Considering this, students need to take more risks, be confident in narrative writing, comprehend narrative features and use time to self-edit their work. In a 12-week program, twice per week, the intervention lessons should be structured with each lesson focuses on 1 or 2 features of narrative and in the last two weeks, lessons can focus on editing and publishing. Annandale, et.al (2003, p.89) state that effective teachers make use of time to analyze a range of students' assessments to make judgements about future teachings. Therefore, teachers should periodically analyze and evaluate students' progressions to further adjust the teaching plans.

The intervention will be effective if it is divided into two sections, i.e. building knowledge of narrative features and conventions, and teaching writing narrative with guided practice. During the first section, encourage students to write freely, ignoring spelling mistakes and 'uninteresting' vocabularies, and provided time in each session for revising. Explain that in the program, they will learn all about narrative and write narrative text and they will not focus on spelling or vocabularies. In the first section, the focus is on the first two stages of Curriculum Cycle (Gibbons, 2001, p.60), i.e. Building up the field and Modelling the text type, combined with Andersons' 6 As (2003). This approach is to connect reading and other background information or experiences into teaching writing that will activate students' interest, engage them in the process and ensure students know what are expected from their writing so they are more motivated.

During the second stage, implement the 'Joint construction' to provide visible illustration of the process of writing and to model where to get ideas and how to develop ideas; and provide students with the 'Independent writing' to plan and complete their narrative planner and construct their own text. Teachers need to monitor students' work and provide support and guidance as needed. For students at 'Early Writing' stage, give out a planner to help them plan and structure their writing. Have students to stretch their ideas by looking for points in their story draft where there is:

- a) Actions: details the reader can act out in his/her mind
- b) Feelings: the emotions the reader feels; nervous, excited, scared, happy, sad, etc.
- c) Descriptions: what the reader sees, smells, hears, touches or tastes.

The final step of the teaching sequence is the sixth A of Andersons', *Assess*. Teachers can teach students how to do self-edit as their final writing process before teacher's feedback and chance to publish their story.

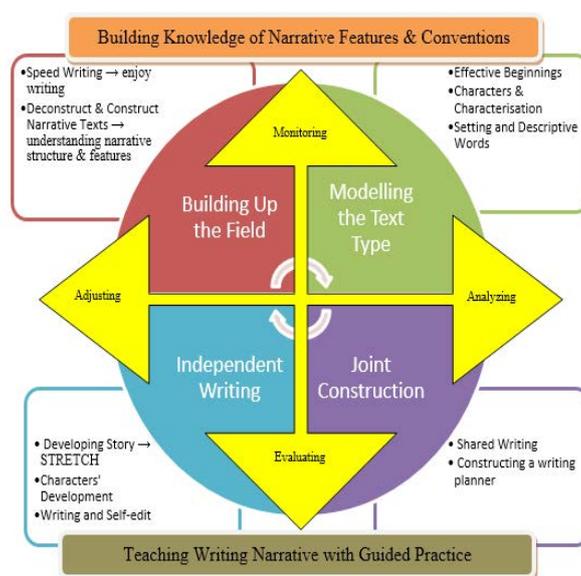


Figure 2. Teaching Narrative Writing Model for Reluctant Writers

CONCLUSION

Students often find writing narrative as a boring activity because it requires a lot of thinking process which is time-consuming and exhausting. The main reasons of students' reluctance are 1) difficulties in finding ideas, 2) difficulties in expanding an idea and 3) fear of making mistakes (spelling) or fear of not having interesting words (vocabularies). Students also struggle in putting details for their story often because their writing planner is too simple. Students need to learn how to expand their writing by stretching, adding more details to their story. To address this problem, teachers can implement Gibbons' Curriculum Cycle (2001) and Andersons' 6 As (2003) to plan a teaching intervention program. A program that is basically divided into two sections: 1. Building knowledge, where students are motivated and introduced to writing conventions; and 2. Teaching with guided practice, where students are provided with complete model to compose an excellent writing. As Clay (2001) suggests, teachers should record changes happening over time to guide their literacy intervention. A continuous monitoring and identification on what is going on should become a reference on intervention program's adjustment to support students' needs. A further study is needed to figure out the effectiveness of narrative writing teaching sequence in the intervention program for struggling writers.

REFERENCES

- Allington, R.L. & Cunningham, P.M. (2011). *Schools that work where all children read and write*. 5th edition. Boston: Pearson/Allyn and Bacon.
- Anderson, K. (2003). *Motivating the Reluctant Writer: A rescue mission for years 3 and beyond*. Wellington: Learning Media.

- Annandale, K., Bindon, R., Handley, K., Johnston, A. Lockett, L. & Lynch, P. (2003). Assessment and evaluation: theory, principles and practices. In K. Annandale, R. Bindon, K. Handley, A. Johnston, L. Lockett & P. Lynch, *Firststeps: Linking assessment, teaching and learning 2nd Edition* (pp. 85-120). Port Melbourne: Rigby. ISBN 0731239458.
- Anstey, M., & Bull, G. (2004) Assessing, evaluating and monitoring language and literacy. In M. Anstey & G. Bull. *The literacy labyrinth*. 2nd edition. (pp. 331-347). Frenchs Forest, NSW: Pearson-Prentice Hall.
- Christie, F. (2005) Speech and writing (Chapter 4). In Christie, F. *Language education in the primary years* (pp.48-63). Sydney, N.S.W.: University of New South Wales Press.
- Clay, M.M. (2001). *Change over time in children's literacy development*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Culham, R. (2009). *Using Benchmark Papers to Teach Writing With the Traits: Grades 3-5*. USA: Scholastic.
- Derewianka, B. (1991). *Exploring how texts work*. Newtown, NSW: PETA.
- Education Department of Western Australia (1997). *First Steps: Writing: Developmental Continuum*. Melbourne: Addison-Wesley.
- Gibbons, P. (2001). Chapter 4 - Writing in a second language across the curriculum: an integrated approach. In, P. Gibbons, *Scaffolding Language Scaffolding Learning*, Portsmouth: Heinemann. Pages 51-76
- Harris, P., McKenzie, B., Fitzsimmons, P. & Turbil, J. (2003) Approaches to writing. In P. Harris, B. McKenzie, P. Fitzsimmons and J. Turbil, *Writing in the Primary School Years*. Tuggerah, NSW: Social Sciences Press.
- Hill, S. (2009). *Developing Early Literacy: Assessment and Teaching*. Melbourne: Eleanor Curtain Publishing.
- McNiff, J. & Whitehead, J. (2006). *All you need to know about action research*. London: Sage Publications.
- National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy. (2010). *Writing Narrative Marking Guide*.
- Primary English Teaching Association. (2006). *Writing {better} Stories*. Newtown: PETA.
- <http://betterlesson.com/lesson/32789/narrative-leads-part-1-action-lead-talking-dialogue-lead-and-sound-effect-lead#/lesson/32789/narrative-leads-part-1-action-lead-talking-dialogue-lead-and-sound-effect-lead?from=tree>, retrieved on 03 November 2016 at 18:47.
- Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (2009) Victorian Essential Learning Standards: Level 4, retrieved on 10 September 2016 from <http://ausvels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/ausvels/level4.html>