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ABSTRACT

In order to help adult readers with problems, it is necessary to develop an approach to teaching them that is sensitive to language and that makes explicit reference to the way language works to make meaning in texts. A language-based approach requires teachers to become more aware of the relatively invisible language system that lies behind the text, as well as the social aspects of purpose and ideology that are always involved in making meaning through language. This approach suggests that teachers and students need to become more aware of the meaning-making powers of language as the basis for developing better teaching strategies. Some of the types of teaching strategies that may help adults with reading problems include the following: (1) cloze with discussion, focusing on chosen words; (2) modeling; (3) joint construction, encouraging students to gradually take on more responsibility; (4) building on students' field knowledge; and (5) use of the language experience approach for very low-level readers or with very anxious readers. (Contains 26 references.) (KC)

Adult readers' problems: how a language-based approach can help.

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1. Adult readers with problems

Portrait of an adult reader

[place text here: *War on small deer*]

An adult reader, a student at a TAFE college, was asked to read this text, as part of a study of reading strategies in children and adults. The text was successfully read by some other readers in the sample of 40 who were in the study, most of these being Primary school students. This reader, a young man in his twenties doing a certificate course for one of the service industries, had already approached the College's Learning Centre for assistance with literacy skills. He was not happy about being asked to read it. He asked me if he had to read all of it (there were three more pages), and said that he didn't know whether he could, because it was too long, and because I was going to ask him 'what happened'. I had indeed said to him previously that I would ask him to 'tell me what you've read so far', at various points in the reading. This, together with the size of the text, was perceived to be very threatening, so he next mentioned to me that he needed to leave the College shortly. I eventually persuaded him to attempt a reading and he did manage the task of reading this text with a moderate level of proficiency.

What lies behind this reader's behaviour? Where does the problem lie ? Does he lack knowledge about what is required of him as a reader? Is it a lack of skill? He plainly is aware in some way of the task and perceives it as being beyond his competence, and this has resulted in a lack of confidence in himself as a reader.

In a language-based approach to reading we will put the emphasis on the texts read and the language features of the texts, the latter being less obvious and partly invisible. What is lacking in many existing approaches to reading is this language dimension, which is the essential 'raw material' of the texts adults read, and which carries the essential code that readers must

crack if they are to be successful readers. Behind every text that readers have to interpret is the language system, from which the writer has made a series of choices to construct the message of the text. By examining how texts make meaning we will clarify some of the essential elements in reading and will describe those aspects of the task that are likely to present problems to adults. Within the framework of this approach to reading some appropriate teaching strategies for adult readers with problems will then be presented.

2. Issues to be clarified.

Functional literacy

If we are concerned with reading then a minimum goal for adults is sometimes called 'functional literacy'. This ambiguous term can conceal a lot. It is sometimes used to refer to a minimum level of proficiency such that the adult can read signs displayed publically, some newspaper advertisements, and documents in use in local services such as libraries, those sent from a school, or some texts that are used in the workplace. What is problematic about the expression functional literacy is that it begs the question of definition of reading competence, and can be used covertly to set boundaries to the reader's abilities. Only some 'public' texts are likely to be accessible to a poorly skilled reader, and these are the texts that are closest to the contexts where the adult is most likely to have made progress in reading - everyday circumstances and personal experience associated with the home or with close family and friends, or with the local environment. Now it is clear that the language of everyday life and personal experience is supported by the familiar contexts in which typical texts are used. But the move into the public arena involves a shift into another set of context types that are very different, and consequently the texts used in the new situations will differ.

There are two aspects involved here. First, the more public texts are intended to function in relative independence from their immediate context, whereas texts in more familiar environments can be interpreted more easily from the known environment. Thus the more familiar texts are likely to be more 'spoken' - using language features characteristic of dialogue, where meaning is constructed in relation to familiar situations and from feedback from the other person. The more public texts are intended to stand alone and not rely so heavily on their immediate environment, so that different strategies are called into play to read them. Second, but related to the first

factor, it is likely that readers' 'coding orientation' (Bernstein, 1971,1990; Sadovnik, 1991) will affect their ability to tackle more than the most familiar of texts. Bernstein's important notion refers to one's ability to construct and interpret texts where meaning is presented explicitly, using textual devices that free the text from an immediate relationship with its situation, so that listeners and readers who are distant from that situation can still understand it. Narratives as well as factual, technical texts are important examples of text types (genres) where this ability to abstract away from immediate, individual experience is crucial if they are to be interpreted successfully.

Characteristics of adult problem readers.

In our culture there is an expectation that the schooling system will equip children with proficiency in reading at primary school, with the secondary school adding competence in literary studies. Adult poor readers are therefore very different to children with reading difficulties, since they will have:

- greater knowledge and experience of the world
- awareness of failure with a valued skill
- low levels of confidence in themselves as readers.

Adults' greater maturity means that they will bring a large store of knowledge to the texts they wish to read, so that teachers will need to respect and acknowledge this strength and take care to choose texts that reflect adults' wide knowledge. Their self-awareness and lack of confidence, however, are factors that call for great sensitivity in dealings with them in learning situations.

Reading development - a continuum?

Reading development becomes an issue when we consider adults with reading difficulties. Is reading learned gradually, over a period of time? Or does it develop relatively quickly over a short space of time? What is it that develops in reading? To answer this question we need to model reading itself. One important aspect to clarify is the notion of written language, since reading involves the ability to interpret written text. There are plainly some knowledges about written language that are a necessary part of reading development, and this knowledge is not gained from experience with spoken language. This is because written language has different characteristics to spoken language (Halliday, 1985a; Hammond, 1990). In particular reading involves an ability to segment the sound stream of speech into phonemes,

an activity which is quite unnatural in speaking and listening. There is therefore a metalinguistic awareness that is part of the development of reading competence. Readers must know about those features of written language that enable written texts to provide their own context and construct meaning in ways peculiar to the written mode. This awareness includes making judgements about language itself, such as the structure of a text, and its grammatical features - 'the ability to treat language itself objectively and to manipulate language structures deliberately' (Ryan & Ledger, 1984, 165).

As well as knowledges about writing readers also need to have skills or strategies that enable them to decode print and to construct meaning. Fluent readers make minimal and highly efficient use of visual cues and have automatised their decoding abilities so as to free themselves to use semantic and grammatical features of the text. They can therefore focus on the word level, sentence level and whole text levels, a strategy which is an essential aspect of successful reading. Some readers are not aware of the significance of these levels in reading and this may be a contributor to their lack of proficiency (Winser, 1991, 1992). Most important is the reader's use of the context of situation underlying the text. The ability to articulate a text with its own environment, creating meaning 'from the friction between the two' (Halliday, 1985b, 47), is probably the essential component of reading skill. This environment includes the type of situation which engendered the text and also the texts that were in existence at that time and that are likely to have influenced it. So the environment of a text consists of both the situation in which it occurred (context of situation) and any related texts (intertextuality).

A final aspect of reading development concerns readers' attitudes towards themselves as readers. The early acquisition of competence in reading feeds back into the learner's sense of achievement and builds up into a positive sense of themselves as readers. Continual failure to acquire this most basic of school skills erodes self-confidence and is likely to generate the sort of behaviours that were evident in our TAFE reader above.

All of these features of reading will have to be allowed for if we are to understand adults' reading problems. What is needed first is a reading model that is be able to deal with all the levels of text including phonemes, words, sentence and text levels. It must take into account the shift from

spoken to written language, based on the differences and similarities between the two, a shift which is a cultural one that opens up a world of new ways of meaning for the literate person. Then it will be possible to address adults' reading problems directly.

A good deal of evidence from psycholinguistic models suggests that reading is mastered all of a piece and is acquired as a single or whole competence, while other models decompose it into a set of subskills that are learned separately and gradually combined into a whole. Whichever of these models is adopted there remains the problem of dealing with adults who have moved well beyond the life situation of younger children. They cannot be treated as children, of course - their situation is very different. If we can explain reading development more fully, by reference to the language system which underlies the texts, and thereby complement existing models, we will be able to decide on ways to support adult readers at their point of development.

3. Aspects of theory relevant to reading

Existing models of reading tend to be dominated by psycholinguistic approaches. These put an emphasis on the reader as processor of textual information. They tend to stress either the print as basis for reading (the 'bottom up' models), and emphasise the need to decode, or reader's knowledge that is brought to the task (the 'top down' models). The latter stress the importance of the reader's existing knowledge and their ability to use context. Another position (the 'interactive' model) takes both top down and bottom up aspects of reading into account, and models the two aspects as interacting with each other. These models have little to say about aspects of texts other than the word; they sometimes take the sentence into account, and there is some treatment of the whole text. However these models have very limited ways of explaining how readers use word, sentence and text levels, together with elements of the situational and cultural context, to build up meaning as they read.

A sociolinguistic approach to reading puts an emphasis on text as an instance of the language system, functioning in context. The language system is to be understood as operating in socio-cultural settings as a resource and a means of social action, rather than a set of rules to be kept.

The systemic-functional model of language (Halliday, 1985b) is an example of language that is modelled in this way. In it language operates as a system from which we make choices according to the function of language we need. These choices vary according to the context:

•At the cultural level there is genre - the aspect of texts where social purpose & ideology are apparent, these being realised in the habitual, repeated patterns or structures of the texts we use every day. A casual conversation, a visit to the doctor, or a letter or formal essay all reflect different socio-cultural purposes and are structured accordingly in characteristic patterns.

• At the situational level there is register - the actual features of language varying according to situation type, with three variables in the situation (field, tenor, mode) affecting the choices made from the system. Imagine this text:

'Beware of falling objects'

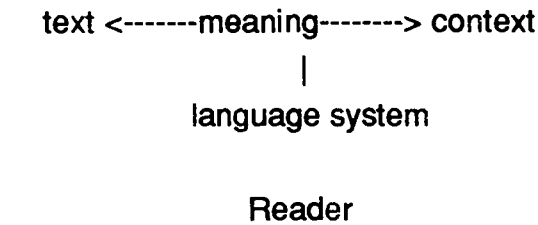
What is likely to be its context? We might imagine a road sign or perhaps a building site as situational contexts where this text would make sense. In fact I read it with some astonishment on the side of a plane's overhead luggage compartment on a recent flight. It was perfectly functional there, for unwary passengers could be injured if the door was opened carelessly; it was therefore easy to interpret in its situation of use - although there was some interference from a similar text I had read while driving recently. This was a sign on a coast road alongside steep rocky cliffs; it read 'Do not stop - falling rocks'. As well as this intertextual aspect of context there is an aspect of context that is peculiar to written texts: writing sets up its own context by using language features that enable the text to stand on its own. While speech, typically occurring in dialogue form, depends on immediate context to make meaning, a written text must be interpretable beyond its immediate context of production. This is done by using features such as internal reference and implicit conjunction to enable the writer to present a message to the reader that does not rely on the immediate context for its meaning. A good example is provided by Hood (1990), in a situation where some people are busy cooking. The interactants say things like 'put this in now', and 'That's OK' where we only would know what 'this' and 'that' are if we were present. But a recipe, which is a written text that must stand up relatively independent of context has different language features. We would read in a recipe 'Beat egg whites until they hold firm peaks', with 'they' this time linking

back to 'egg whites', within the text itself. Thus the written text is not so dependent on its immediate context.

Thus in this language model the basic unit is the text, a semantic unit which is produced and interpreted in contexts of use. Texts are instances of the language system, the product of choices made from the system, itself a key social and cultural resource for making and exchanging meaning. So the task of the reader is to work with text and context, through the language system, to reconstruct and deconstruct possible meanings.

4. A model of reading: The systematic link between Text and Context is the basis for any reading model.

Reading is understood as *reconstruction* and *deconstruction* of meaning from *text in context*, drawing on the *language system*.



Here meaning is found in the interaction (friction) between *text* and *context*. Readers intuitively use this relationship to construct meaning, drawing on their previous discursive history and their experience with other texts. They reconstruct the features of the context, especially the context the text itself sets up.

The reading process must be seen as a learned social practice in which readers, with their own subject position (their 'bank' of social and cultural experiences), faced with the text to be read,
make assumptions about the context (situation type and genre),
and interpret it with reference to the language system, thereby deriving possible meanings. The main strategy used by readers is prediction, the process by which they supply the missing elements in the text through presupposition. For a fuller discussion of this model see Winser (in press).

A language based approach to reading therefore stresses that the reader will need to be helped to utilise all of these features of language: the text, the context and the language system. We can make a closer examination of adult readers' problems by focussing on what they do and do not know about language and reading. Here is an example of one reader's understanding of reading:

> Bill: Through first and second grade I can remember memorising the books. I didn't read the stories, I would memorise them.
> Interviewer: Did you know that wasn't really reading?
> Bill: No.
> Int: Or did you think that was what it was all about?
> Bill: At the time, yes. (Johnston, 1985, 380, cited in Cormack, 1992)

This reader's perception of the task is so inadequate that we might assume that he lacks almost any understanding of the demands made on him in the task of reading.

The reading task may conveniently be understood by attending to what it is the reader must be able to do with reference to the various levels of text. First, at the level of the word, readers must be able to decode print and attack words as they appear in the text. An important element here is the reader's phonemic awareness, their understanding that the significant sounds of English (the phonemes) are related to the symbols that are represented in print. It is not normal for listeners to segment the sound stream that they hear in speech into separate words, so readers have to learn a new competence when they tackle print, where words are represented by symbols. Some beliefs about 'phonics' demonstrate a misunderstanding about reading and language. The relationship between sounds and print is a complex but systematic one in English; the underlying principle is that significant sounds (phonemes) are related to symbols (letters or letter groups) in the written language. There is a many to many relationship here, not a simple 1:1 link between 'sound' and letter. So one sound can be represented many ways (the 'ee' sound in 'feet', 'meat', 'believe' etc) and the same symbol can

represent many sounds ('ou' differs in value in 'out', 'ought', 'enough' and 'camouflage'). It may be useful to check that the adult reader can:

* segment words into phonemes
* relate phonemes to letter names.

If there are problems here the reader is likely to benefit from some explicit support in developing their phonemic awareness.

Then readers have to learn how to attack words directly, by using strategies like configurations of words, analysis of structures, similarity to known words, context clues, alphabet patterns and by direct study of word meanings (for a fuller discussion, see McKay, 1981).

Next, at the sentence level, the grammatical issue becomes important, since sentences are constructed using grammatical principles. The reader must know that words get meaning from each other; in fact it is probably best to think of a word as simply that part of the text that the reader happens to be focussing on at any given time. So it is the grammar, the system that enables words to work together in combinations, that is a key resource in the construction of meaning. Readers can be helped to understand how grammatical patterns work by using cloze activities, where the text deletions have been motivated by grammatical principles. Lexical items can be deleted in a factual text, to highlight technical terms in nominal groups (phrases), or elements that affect cohesion, such as conjunctions, can be focussed on and discussed so as to clarify sentence combination principles. Another useful activity that develops grammatical awareness is the 'dictogloss' procedure (see Wajnryb, 1990).

Finally, at the whole text level, readers need help in understanding how meaning is constructed beyond the sentence level. First there is the purpose and schematic structure of the text, aspects that are dealt with in Martin's genre-based studies (Christie, 1989; Derewianka, 1990). Attention can be drawn to the social significance and value of the text, and to the way it is structured to achieve this purpose. Comparisons between different genres and their purpose and structure can be made, using a variety of texts, and readers can be encouraged to deconstruct texts by looking at ways genre can conceal ideologies (e.g. in the role of the male 'hero' figures in narrative). Factual texts can also be examined in this way, particularly the so-called 'objective' texts of science, which attempt to suppress human participants and social issues. Then there are the various textual elements

that enable a text to build up its total message; particularly important here is the 'theme', the starting point of each clause, which predicts what is to come in the rest of the clause. As the themes are read across the whole text they point to the 'new' information which accumulates in the rest of the text. Here is an example of how this works in a factual text:

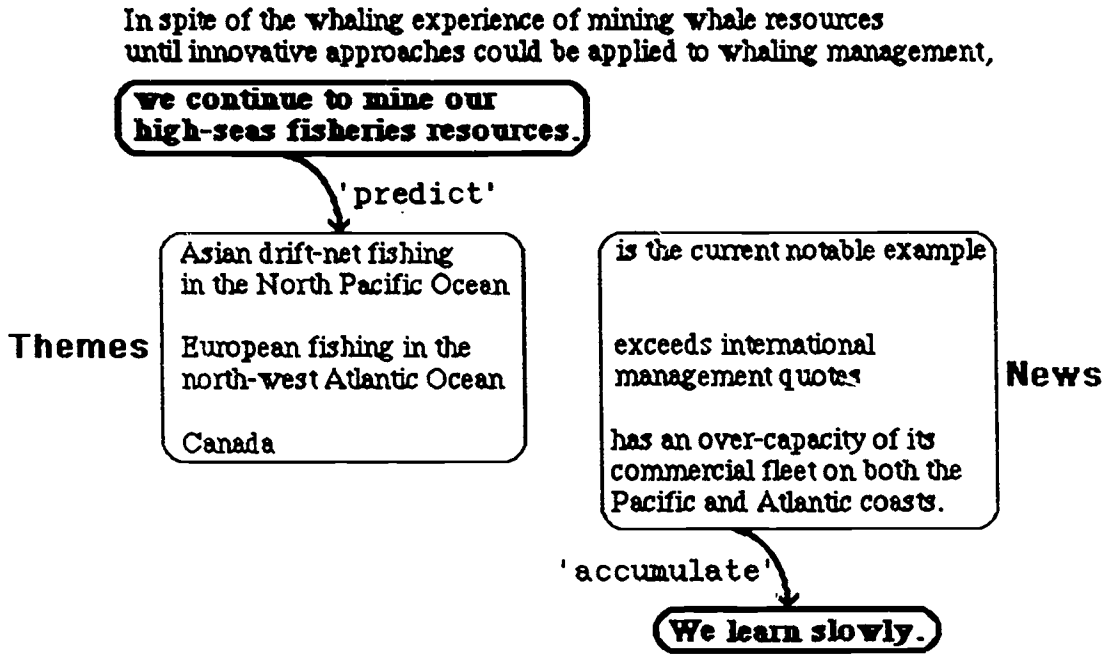


Figure 1 (taken from Martin, 1991)

Readers can be helped to comprehend at the whole text level by being encouraged to look at the big picture in a text and to check their comprehension of it by examining the sequence of clause themes across the whole text, in this way. Other important whole text features include conjunctions and reference, both of which can be foregrounded by carefully constructed cloze activities.

The various levels of a text must therefore be carefully attended to in a reading lesson. There is an important bridging process involved here ie., the reader has to connect the meanings and if there is too great a gap between them they have difficulty with comprehension, because they have difficulty in making inferences. This can be illustrated with an example of a poorly constructed text:

'Jane likes the smell of freshly cut grass.
The grass was wet'.

The connection between these two sentences is made by repetition (a cohesive device) of the word 'grass' and by reference ('the'); however in this

text these connections are so weak that there is a good deal of ambiguity in the overall meaning. A reader must be able to use a shuttling technique, using the grammar as the basic resource, but also cohesive resources (reference, conjunction, lexical cohesion & theme). The shuttling must take place between the two levels of sentence and whole text so as to build up complete patterns of meaning.

There is some evidence that poorer readers do not use text structure effectively when they read (Maclean & Gold, 1986). There are studies where the story has been cut short or has had material deleted, and the poorer readers had difficulty in predicting the rest of the text from the basic structural patterns, while others show insensitivity to them when asked to recall stories read.

An underlying issue in this discussion is the question of metalinguistic awareness, the ability to access the grammar and schematic structure of a text and to make judgments about language itself in relation to that text. Such awareness is probably related to reading skill, although there is a need for caution about how these two factors in reading are related; is one a prerequisite for, or a product of, the other? It is more likely that there is an interaction between the two, with increasing awareness developing as a result of beginning to read and with increased reading competence developing more awareness. Certainly any formal reading situation, such as the reading classroom, where there is a deliberate and concentrated focus on written texts, will increase awareness. In adults there is some evidence that suggests that metalinguistic awareness is late developing and is lacking in the less proficient, so some focus on language awareness seems appropriate in teaching reading to adults with reading problems (Winser, 1992).

6. Teaching reading to adults

Some principles for teaching reading to adults can be developed from the model outlined above. The **reader** must use:

- Prediction - a fundamental language skill, whatever the language mode. A reader constantly asks, what's coming next? This strategy is especially important at the level of the sentence and the text.
- Inference - this strategy applies at the same two levels.

• Shuttling - the ability to move between the various levels of a text, from broader elements like its social purpose and ideology to specific language elements, down to individual words.

All of these strategies are based on the reader's language knowledge and world knowledge, and both of these types of knowledge are needed for successful reading. It may be safe to assume that adults have acquired a quite strong knowledge of the world, but there will still be a need to check that they know the 'field' (subject matter) of the texts being read. It is also likely that problem readers lack language knowledge, and closely related here is their metalinguistic awareness.

The **teacher** must *Model* and *Jointly Construct* meaning in texts for and with readers, by amplifying the context as support for the reader. This involves the development in the learning situation of a 'visible pedagogy' (Bernstein, 1990) whereby learners become aware of what is required of them in the achievement of the task of reading. These two activities, modelling and jointly constructing meaning, have been developed as part of the Disadvantaged Schools Project in the Sydney Metropolitan East Region of the N. S. W. Dept of School Education. The Project has developed a curriculum genre for learning to write which incorporates reading as part of the cycle (D.S.P. Language and Social Power Project, 1988, 1989a. 1989b, 1990, 1991).

•Modelling the text involves paying attention to the purpose, social importance and structures of the text, and can be done more or less explicitly. With adults it seems likely that teachers can direct readers' attention quite directly to textual features, as outlined above (Section 3). There are also features of texts that are more apparent on the surface, such as title page, table of contents and index, glossary , and pictures and diagrams. These also need to be modelled.

•Joint construction can take place where teacher and students read a text together ('shared reading'), with the teacher encouraging the class to join in with the reading in various ways. This can take the form of reading out aloud to the class and asking questions that require readers to predict or infer, of conducting an oral cloze (stopping and asking the students to suggest the next word), of asking one student to read a section and generally encouraging the class to contribute to the interpretation of the text in any way they can. However the teacher takes up the conscious role of expert on the language of the text, and uses the opportunities raised by the

specific features of the text being read, or by student questions or reactions to the text, to draw readers' attention to the way the language of the text is constructing meaning - again using the features outlined in Section 3 as a framework.

7. Teaching strategies: a summary

We can sum up the types of teaching strategy that may help adult problem readers.

• Cloze with discussion, focussing on chosen words (not random cloze) to be deleted for grammatical reasons:

- lexical (content words, ie those specific to the field)
- function words (grammatical)

This activity will reveal readers' strategies and allows teacher modelling to take place. This is an example of a cloze that focusses on reference, which enable the text to cohere more effectively:

[put 'Tigers' text here]

• Modelling (cf. 'shared reading') - teacher centred activity drawing explicit attention to purpose, audience and text features, both structural and grammatical. Can be done with big books, newspapers, and magazines.

• Joint construction - slowly shift responsibility onto the readers to use their field knowledge; encourage readers to comment on 'content', while the teacher comments on language features as directly as possible.

• Build on their field knowledge and if necessary build it up before and/or during reading. Develop their knowledge/concepts related to the field in general; relate unknown vocabulary to already known concepts (e.g. ' turn down the volume' for volume in the technical sense).

• Use the language experience approach (Stauffer, 1970) for real beginner readers or with very anxious readers. Focus on the students' interests and encourage them to construct a personal recount based on their own experiences, scribing for them and then encouraging them by reading their own texts to them, and slowly get them accustomed to reading these texts back to you. Be aware of the limitations of this approach: the students' language will be 'spoken' and so it is necessary to move from this approach to one where you intervene gradually to help them understand how writing works ie., by modelling and jointly constructed reading.

To help adult readers with problems it is necessary to develop an approach to teaching them which is sensitive to language, and which makes explicit reference to the way language works to make meaning in texts. A language-based approach requires teachers to become more aware of the relatively invisible language system that lies behind the text, as well as the social aspects of purpose and ideology that are always involved in making meaning through language. This approach suggests that teachers particularly, but also students, need to become more aware of the meaning making powers of language as the basis for developing better teaching strategies in the classroom and effective reading practices in the students.

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"War on Small Deer!"

One day Small Deer wanted to go to the other side of the river to eat the sweet fruit there. As soon as he came to the river, the crocodiles put their huge heads up out of the water.

"War on Small Deer! War on Small Deer!" they roared.

One crocodile rushed out of the water to bite Small Deer.

Small Deer pushed a small stick in the crocodile's mouth.

Then Small Deer cried, "You bit my leg. Let go! Let go!"

The crocodile was fooled. He thought the stick was really Small Deer's leg. So he bit down hard on the stick.

All the other crocodiles laughed. Now, when crocodiles laugh, they shut their eyes. When they had all shut their eyes, Small Deer ran away.

But he still wanted the sweet fruit on the other side of the river.