



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

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BILINGUAL LANGUAGE TEACHING

Ron Lister,
Amata Aboriginal School, S.A.

Since Amata Aboriginal school commenced late in 1968 we have followed a policy of respecting the wishes of the parents. One such wish was that their children learn to read and write their own language as well as learn to speak, read and write English. Hence, the policy regarding language teaching at Amata school stands: *"to teach literacy in both languages."*

Basically, the means by which we attempt to meet the demands of this policy consist of beginning all instruction in and about Pitjantjatjara. Then, once a level of proficiency has been attained, (mainly a sound phonetical grasp of Pitjantjatjara) the particular child is moved to a class where instruction is almost entirely in and about English.

Thus, the infant grades' language lessons are mainly Pitjantjatjara. We have been fortunate in the past to have a European teacher who could, before two years in the area, speak Pitjantjatjara fluently. She could, thereby, teach the infant children about Pitjantjatjara.

Now we have Aboriginal teacher aides who are doing the same job, with a European teacher as part of the teaching team.

Once a child is proficient in Pitjantjatjara the next move is into grade 3 where European teachers, with the assistance of an aide, take over the child's instruction. In fact, by this stage, the child has attained a few phrases of English speech and can write some basic words.

Presently, the grade 3's (for want of a better title) range in age from nine to sixteen years, and are divided into a class for boys and a separate class for girls, this being the expressed desire of the boys. It is mainly the grade 3 boys' class which will be discussed here. However, most of what is mentioned is also applicable to the class of girls.

The basic fact to keep in mind is that we are trying to enable the children to become fluent in all aspects of both English and Pitjantjatjara before they leave school.

This entails four main tasks:

1. to continue teaching writing and reading in Pitjantjatjara and simultaneously,

We have supported all this "*experimental/incidental*" oral language by oral and written drills and have found that *English for Migrant Children*" is a good reference in assisting us. We have also formulated a lot of our own drill procedures.

We recorded, in a written form, as much as possible of what the children spoke. The value of doing so has proven tremendous and will be discussed later.

We believe the underlying theme when teaching Pitjantjatjara children to speak English is that what they really *want* to talk about are the things which matter to *them*; such as themselves, their friends, their country, their leisure time and their experiences. We have been satisfied with this method and have seen individual children develop oral English skills using this approach, supported by oral language drills of an uninhibiting nature. We have also built up a vast collection of stories we now use as classroom readers.

We find the children like to write about the same things they talk about. Furthermore, they like nothing better than to read their own stories or their friends' stories.

We have a close relationship between the writing and reading of English. Perhaps if I discuss one method we use, it may be possible to appreciate the nature of this, and other, relationships.

Each Wednesday for the past two years Charlie, an Aboriginal aide, has told traditional and personal stories to the school children. He usually takes about thirty minutes to tell two stories. Naturally, these are in Pitjantjatjara.

We soon realized the potential of these stories as "*lead-ins*" to second language teaching simultaneously with Pitjantjatjara language teaching. The children first listened to the stories, then returned to their various classes for the follow-up activities.

A typical follow-up lesson with my class had us outside miming, using English narration, the stories Charlie told. The children who had no part in the miming were asked to give me an English and/or Pitjantjatjara commentary on the mime. I noted what they said, stressing the importance of their giving me an accurate account of the mime. After the mime I had gathered a written account of the stories in English, and the children could retell the stories in English.

Then we moved back into the room (the great inhibitor at that time) to record and illustrate the stories. Some children would write their own accounts in Pitjantjatjara, some would copy from the chalk-board the account they had given me outside, and some others would write their own accounts in English.

I corrected all stories on that afternoon and handed them back to the children Thursday morning. Meanwhile, I had taken note of

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2. to introduce the initial* oral and written forms of English,
3. to extend the basic English skills some children have attained,
4. to attempt remedial teaching of any weaknesses within each of these areas.

This may seem rather complex at first but after about two years of experimentation it is surprising how all four above-mentioned tasks can be accomplished in the one language lesson.

The methodology soon to be discussed has been tried and tested over the past three years with, largely, the same group of children and teachers at the one school. We have tried principles suggested by linguists and have formulated and tested our own principles.

The first principle we accepted was that "*oral language must precede written language.*" (Lado) We spent much time in just motivating the children to talk in either language. We found that the children spoke quite freely out-of-doors in English about such topics as what they did during weekends, about movies they had seen, about trips they had been on, and about traditional stories previously told to them. We found that, within a role-playing atmosphere, English came forth spontaneously. I remember that the first English phrase I heard from a particular child came when we were gardening during an activity session. He turned to his mate and demanded: "*Gimme that bloody shovel mate.*" Use of a little word play and imagination soon had the group speaking only English during that session. This then became regular practice.

Motivation is all-important. We consciously avoided establishing a situation where oral English was demanded. Instead, we created situations where the children enjoyed an attempt at speaking English. Naturally, some children would take advantage of this and just listen to their friends speak. But eventually all the children will, given a conducive atmosphere, speak some of the new language.

I found that forming poems is a fine way of getting the children thinking of and speaking new words. Once, during a health lesson, we formulated the following:

*Flies are no good.
They rubbish my food,
They tickle my toes,
And get up my nose.*

That took fifty minutes of prompting a group of ten children.

Making up songs is equally successful. All it takes is imagination and time and one person who can play the guitar. The end result is never forgotten by the children.

**Vocabulary building from words newly introduced mainly by the children*

common errors and used this information as the basis for subsequent drill lessons. A correct, comprehensive version of the story was then given to the children to read. A smaller group of children received a Pitjantjatjara version.

Thursday afternoon was programmed so that I could be free to hear the children read those stories, usually on to a tape. I would listen to them individually, correct pronunciation, intonation, rhythm and grammar usage as required, then ask questions about what they had read to me. Finally, the children had the opportunity of listening to themselves on the tape.

By the end of 1972 we had collected accurate written accounts of Charlie's stories, with illustrations. These were then made into classroom readers to be read at leisure. They are still popular readers to this day.

By the beginning of the 1973 school year we had collected all of Charlie's stories to date, written comprehension exercises on each story, written word drill exercises (jumbled words, substitution and word meaning research). I then explained the usage of this new format to the class and had them make covers for individual readers. Each child would then have his own reader containing five stories, with room provided for illustrations, and a sheet of comprehension and drill exercises about each story. He had to complete one story, plus the comprehension and drill exercises, each day.

We now have a collection of individual readers which each child has read, illustrated, comprehended and, most importantly, enjoyed.

In addition, versions of these readers were printed in both languages, so that whilst some children read the transcription of Charlie's story in English, others read a Pitjantjatjara version of the same story.

We are currently using the same methods to produce individual readers containing stories written by the children themselves.

Because Charlie cannot read or write Pitjantjatjara at a suitable level, I use another aide to complete the extensions required in Pitjantjatjara fluency teaching.

At this stage all the children in grade 3 can speak, read and write both languages to various degrees. I would estimate that, of fifty children, about fifteen to twenty will be consistently accurate readers, writers and speakers of both languages by the end of this school year. Of course, some will achieve higher levels of proficiency than others but they will all have the *basis* for complete fluency in both languages.

If an expert Pitjantjatjara linguist were available as consultant, we would be more able to teach the vernacular effectively.